Interview with Walter B. Smith II

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

WALTER B. SMITH, II

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JUNIOR YEARS: Rapid-Fire Multinational Exposure (1958-1969)Beginnings

Q: Today is May 17, 1993. This is an interview with Walter B. Smith II. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Starting with the beginning, could you give me an idea of your background—where and when you were born and a bit about your family, to provide an idea of who you are?

SMITH: I was born on December 10, 1929, in Providence, Rhode Island. I went to school in Providence until going away to boarding school at St. George's School in Newport, Rhode Island, where I spent three years. I went to Princeton University, majored in modern European history with a minor in early European history and graduated in the Class of 1951. In my last year at Princeton I became interested in the Russian Orthodox Church. I suspect that this may have been because I met a fellow just out of college at that time named Ivan Obolensky, who seemed a rather charismatic individual who came from one of the oldest and, at one time, one of the most powerful families in the Russian Empire. This influenced me. I was interested in church matters, so that the interest in church matters and Russian affairs combined. I wrote my senior thesis during my last year at Princeton on the fate of the Russian Orthodox Church during the first decade of Soviet rule, though

I did not know what I was talking about. It was not a good thesis, but it meant that I was genuinely interested in Soviet affairs.

Two weeks after I graduated [from Princeton] in June, 1951, I was whisked, as an ROTC Second Lieutenant, into the U.S. Army as an artillery officer. About eight months later I was assigned to a heavy artillery battalion in Germany. I applied, almost as a lark, for Russian language training on arrival in Germany in the spring of 1952. Within a month and a half I found myself at Oberammergau in a six-month, intensive Russian language course, run by the U. S. Army-Europe Intelligence School, where I managed to finish the course first in a class of 100 students. I fell in love with the Russian language. Really, more than any other, single event in my life, this affected what came after.

I got out of the Army in the summer of 1953 and was dickering with CIA about possible employment. They could not get organized. They had a backlog of people awaiting security clearances. So I entered the Russian Institute at Columbia University. I would normally have completed the course in the allotted two years but I became distracted by Middle Eastern affairs and dreamt up a program with Russian history as the major and Ottoman Turkish history as the minor. I would have been the first individual ever to have done this combination at Columbia University, had I gone through with it. This meant that the perfectionists running both departments laid on all kinds of requirements.

Decision to Join the Foreign Service

Fortunately for me, I met my first wife on my way to Turkey in the summer of 1955 on a student ship. One year later we were married. I left graduate school and worked as a trainee in foreign marketing with what is now the Exxon Oil Company. My first wife was the daughter of Ted Achilles, then an active duty Foreign Service officer who was DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] in Paris at the time of our wedding. He then went off as Ambassador to Peru. He jovially twisted my arm to forget about CIA and go into the Foreign Service—and certainly to forget about foreign marketing [with Exxon]. For some

childish reason of pride I suspect that I held off applying to the Foreign Service a year longer than I might otherwise have—because I did not want to seem to be following in the footsteps of my new father-in-law. But that, of course, is what I ultimately did.

I applied to the Foreign Service in the spring or summer of 1957 and took the written exam without the knowledge of my wife or her family. We were living in New York. I took the oral examination without the knowledge of my in-laws, who were then in Peru. I went to Washington [for the oral examination] in the fall of 1957. A couple of active duty, senior Foreign Service officers took me out and got me plastered the night before I took my oral exam, and maybe that helped—I do not know.

In any case I entered active duty in the Foreign Service in the spring of 1958.

Q: No, that's fine. What sort of training did you get when you came into the Foreign Service?

SMITH: I went, of course, to the Basic Course which, in those days, was always given immediately after entrance into the service. I learned nowhere near enough about consular work, despite the fact that there was a fairly good introduction to consular work [in the course]. I regretted later that I hadn't spent more time on it.

Temporary Duty in Moscow: the U.S.-USSR Exchange Program

My first assignment, because I had studied the Russian language, was to what was, in effect, the U.S.-Soviet Exchanges Staff, handling scientific, cultural, and academic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. The exchange program was only a year or two old at that time. Details of these exchanges were negotiated by the Director of the Staff with a Minister in the Soviet Embassy [in Washington] on a weekly basis. I was the note-taker for these meetings. I had been in the Foreign Service for a grand total of three months when I started doing this. It was very heady stuff. Also, there was a Special Assistant to the Secretary, Ambassador “Wild Bill” Lacy,

who was in charge of so-called “East-West Contacts.” He would meet with “Smiling Mike” Menshikov, then Soviet Ambassador [to the United States], from time to time. And Ambassador Lacy used me as his note-taker. So this was very exciting, indeed. Scarcely a year after I entered the Foreign Service, USIA [United States Information Agency] and the Department of Commerce were setting up what was to be the American National Exhibition in Moscow. They suddenly realized that they could not handle it all. They sent an SOS to the Department of State, and three young, bushy-tailed Foreign Service officers, having some knowledge of Russian, myself included, were sent to Moscow in the summer of 1959.That was heady stuff, too. I had never been there before.

Q: Before we get to that, how did we view the exchange program? Wasn't it a major concern of ours that we'd be sending real exchange people, and they'd be sending over KGB agents?

SMITH: That is exactly what it was. There was enormous, well-intended, but naive interest in the United States in the exchange program. The main role of our little staff, among other things, was to obtain some kind of reciprocity in return for giving the Soviets a free intelligence and propaganda ride inside the United States. We tried to make sure that Americans could be exposed, to some extent, to the public inside the Soviet Union. Another and not so unimportant role was to play “Dutch Boy with Finger in the Dyke” with their favorite points of attack, trying to keep Americans—radio stations in Minnesota, if you will—from falling prey to alleged “people to people” ploys, which were part of the Soviet system. The Soviets were forever trying to “end run” the U.S. federal government and set up so-called exchange arrangements directly with well-intended but rather ill-informed American groups. With absolutely no authority we did head off at the pass a lot of these initiatives. That is what the exchange operation was from the Washington end.

Q: Was the concern that these so-called unofficial or “end run” types of exchange...

SMITH: We would have no reciprocity. If they were not negotiated directly between the two governments, the Soviets could get more or less what they wanted in the United States and they would not give us any chance to try and convey the American point of view to the Soviet people. The only way we got to travel inside the Soviet Union and to have some contact with public groups, other than through strictly and tightly controlled channels, was by negotiating very hard, when the Soviets wanted to do something in the United States.

Q: Then you went to Russia, the Soviet Union...

SMITH: Just for three months, in the summer of 1959. But it was quite an eye opener. My initial, two-year tour with the exchanges staff was running out. I had, of course, hoped that I would be assigned, if not to Moscow, then to some other, so-called “Iron Curtain” post. However, that was not the way it worked. In those days newly appointed officers not only received consular assignments at the beginning of their Foreign Service careers but usually were assigned to some very large consular operation. I was no exception. I was sent to Frankfurt-am-Main as a citizenship officer during my first year. There were three vice consuls whose sole function in life at that time was to register the births of American citizen children.

Q: I had that job a little before you, from 1957 to 1958.

SMITH: Where?

Q: In Frankfurt.

Consular Work in Germany

SMITH: Then you know exactly what I am talking about. It was one of the largest consular districts in the world in terms of American citizens, mainly because of military dependents. The military thought that the Foreign Service operation was laughable. They were so self-contained. They took care of all of their own requirements, except for one detail. That is,

children born abroad to soldier fathers and, in the cases I worked on, non-U.S. citizen mothers. The children could not enter the United States without documentation. We had a very hard nosed chief of the Consular Section then, Henry Goldsmith, who played hard ball and delayed the reassignment of U.S. soldiers back to the United States, if, as often happened to a man with an alien wife, her documentation or their child's documentation were all fouled up. It frequently happened that the child had been conceived and many times even born while the soldier's wife was still married to someone else. These cases got terribly complex. Frankly, I felt that, in the long run, we were doing the child a service by forcing the parents to straighten out the child's documentation while they were right there in Europe.

This assignment lasted a little less than a year because by the end of my first year in Frankfurt the acting Consul General, the late Wayland Waters, yanked me out of the Consular Section and said, “Here, write this post's Emergency and Evacuation Plan.” The Consulate General had been completely dependent on the military until then, and someone decided that this was not right and that the Consulate General should have a separate plan. I did not have a clue about what I was doing. I struggled with this for about three months, and then the junior slot in the Political Section opened up in the summer of 1961. I moved down to work with Paul Kattenburg, who was the Political Officer, just as the Berlin crisis was coming to a head.

Berlin Crisis of 1961

Q: What Berlin crisis was this?

SMITH: It was “The” Berlin crisis, the crisis which grew out of the building of the Berlin Wall. When did the Wall go up?

Q: In 1961.

SMITH: It grew out of the building of the Wall. There were U.S. and Soviet tanks squared off along the Berlin Wall. Khrushchev played “Russian roulette” with us, and it was a standoff, in effect. But it made for a very nerve-wracking situation, and the German public, in particular, was nervous about the possibility of World War III. The function of the political reporting operation at Frankfurt at the time was to try to measure to some extent, not just popular attitudes, but particularly the attitudes of the German political leadership. This was because the opposition party, the SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany], had its leading lights in the Frankfurt area. That's what Paul Kattenburg and I did.

Q: How did you go about that?

SMITH: Well, Kattenburg's German was absolutely extraordinary—he is a native of Belgium and learned very good German with a heavy, Belgian-French accent. He had a lot of charm and energy. He would simply go after these people and insist on seeing them. He would take me along. I would be sort of a note taker. Actually, I started to develop some contacts with much younger, aspiring politicians in the SPD, in the Hessian state government and in the Frankfurt city government. It was an act of frenzied energy, for which Paul Kattenburg is famous. We churned out an enormous amount of reporting on what we were told to report on.

Q: How did you, to use a military term, “interface” with the CIA? We had a very large CIA operation there. From what you were gathering, were they getting any better information than we were, or did you have any feel for this?

SMITH: They were not reporting very much, to my knowledge, on the subjects which Kattenburg and I were reporting on. They may have been, but it certainly never came to our attention. They were focusing on some interesting things. For example, there were quite a few African and Asian students who gravitated to West Germany in that period because they were so frustrated at their experience in trying to get a higher education inside the Soviet Union. CIA did a good deal of debriefing these people, probably recruiting

some of them as well. That is an operation that I just learned about by accident while I was there.

Q: You were in Frankfurt from when to when?

Polish Language Training: Consul at Warsaw

SMITH: From 1960 to 1962. Then I came back to the U.S. and took the Polish language course. At that time it was a 10-month course. It need not have been, particularly for me, as I knew Russian, although I had to “unlearn” Russian in order to learn Polish. Nevertheless, I naturally had quite a leg up because of the similarity in the grammar. For about four months I recall spending most of my afternoons in INR [Bureau of Intelligence Research and Analysis], trying to learn about COMECON [Council for Mutual Economic Assistance], the Soviet Bloc trade organization. I became rather convinced that it was working and that it was not all sham. INR repudiated my point of view and wanted nothing to do with it. INR was dead right, and I was dead wrong, but it was a learning exercise for me. This was how I spent part of at my time, because there was some “slack” time [in the language program].

There was a nice group in my Polish class—about six officers. Of course, we all went from there to Warsaw in the summer of 1963, where I was assigned to the Consular Section. I was chief of the Immigrant Visa Unit, which comprised four officers. There were also Non-Immigrant and Citizenship and Welfare Units in the Consular Section. About six months into my tour the chief of the Consular Section—I can not recall why—was reassigned to Washington. Although I was two ranks below the position, I had gotten to know the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], Bud Shearer quite well, and he offered me the job. So, after I was in Warsaw for half a year, I became chief of the Consular Section, which was one of the most interesting experiences I ever had.

Q: You were in Warsaw from when to when?

SMITH: From 1963 to 1965.

Q: What was the situation in Poland in that period?

SMITH: The regime was gradually tightening up. It had raised a lot of expectations in its defiance of the Soviets in 1956. This was scarcely six or seven years later. It had not been able to establish any “wiggle space” for itself within the Soviet embrace. Of course, the leaders of the regime, while probably Polish nationalists, were communists first and foremost. It was never a popular regime in Poland. The economy was not doing well. That, in particular, made the regime nervous, and its response to the situation was to tighten up on internal security. Nevertheless, American diplomats who took the trouble to learn Polish and any other diplomats who knew Polish were not prevented from having contact [with the people]. I can not imagine even the most tight fisted Polish regime ever being able hermetically to seal off Polish-speaking diplomats [from the people], which the regime did with ease in Moscow. We were followed wherever we drove in Poland, but there were no “closed areas,” except for obvious military camps.

A Diplomat's Life in Poland - 1960s

My first wife learned Polish. She had also learned Russian, at the time she went with me to Moscow in 1959. She had taken a “crash” course in Russian. She now learned Polish. We drove all over Poland and used our language. We had a German nurse—we already had four very small children by the time we got to Warsaw. We had a wonderful German nurse, and that “liberated” my wife to participate in the more intellectually stimulating and more human dimensions of Foreign Service life. She was very good at it and she loved it.

I was directly transferred in the summer of 1965 from Warsaw to Moscow.

Q: Let's stay with Warsaw for a bit. In the first place, talking about the life there, it hadn't been too long—three or four years—since there had been a rather famous case of [the

Polish intelligence service's] “turning” one of our General Services Officers. Did you find it a problem getting information from [the Polish people]?

SMITH: I think that the Department was understandably nervous about the staff in Warsaw. The security people [in the Embassy] were a lot more numerous than they normally would have been. They talked to us regularly [about the security risks] but they did not establish the kind of rules which would have hampered our ability to have contacts in Warsaw. There were all kinds of rules about reporting unusual incidents to them, but there were no restrictions on language officers contacting Poles. Even consular officers were welcome to have social contacts with Poles. And we did—all of us. That made all the difference in the world.As I started to say, I went from Warsaw to Moscow. In this one critical respect it was like going from day to night, in terms of being able to have contacts, although I did have a lot more contact in Moscow than people normally do, obviously because the KGB assigned some interesting young people to be my “friends.” I was a Political Officer in Moscow, and so I was allowed to do this. I mean, these Russians would come to our home, and we'd go to their homes.

Time Warps; Defectors

Q: What was the consular work like when you were in Poland?

SMITH: It was really fabulous. Poland had still not stepped beyond about 1920 in terms of economic and social conditions, as compared with Western Europe. For example, there were whole villages in Poland where the people wore wooden shoes every day. There were large sections of Poland where the peasantry wore local costumes as their main form of dress. There were wonderful stories told by my colleagues in the Immigrant Visa Unit about peasants from the Province where so many Americans of Polish origin come from, Rzeszow in southeastern Poland, a lovely and charming area but economically very backward. These poor people would come, as often as not, by horse cart to Warsaw, 100 miles or so away. They had to be fingerprinted, for example, at the

beginning of processing their immigrant visa applications. Several times these immigrant visa applicants were told to go and wash their hands, after they were fingerprinted, and they did not come back for an hour. When they came back, they were asked where they had been. Their answer was that they had gone down to the Warsaw River to wash their hands because they had not heard of and had never seen running water! This made the immigrant visa operation extremely interesting because it was an exposure to a different period of time.

Q: Were there many pressures on you from the Chicago area, for example, or Congress, and all that?

SMITH: There was an awful lot of Congressional correspondence. I felt that, as chief of the Consular Section, I should spend a fair amount of time going over Congressional correspondence, and I did. I found a provision in the Nationality Act relating to visas intended for communists living in the Free World who became disillusioned and could enter the United States on a special basis if they could demonstrate that for a minimum period of time they had not only ceased to be communists but had been active anti-Communists. I figured out a way to use that provision of law to help Poles who, I was convinced, were anti-Communists, to get special visa status to enter the United States from behind the Iron Curtain. This provision had never been used before. It was very satisfying to achieve that during my time there.

Q: How about non-immigrant visas? Did you have to check these applications to make sure that the people were really non-immigrants?

Refusing Pretty Girls; U.S.-Polish Negotiations

SMITH: One of our junior CIA officers, under Foreign Service “cover,” was the non-immigrant visa officer throughout my time [in Warsaw] and did an extraordinarily thorough and careful job. I had no concerns about our making a serious error in that area. There was a lot of non-immigrant activity. A common problem with non-immigrant visa applicants

was that they were frequently very pretty young women with no visible means of support once they got to the United States. Obviously, they were going there, hoping to get married. We had to turn those young ladies down routinely, which was sad but necessary. There were interesting people applying for non-immigrant visas—commercial travelers, and so forth, in addition to government officials, performing artists, and so on. There was a brisk trade. I did not spend nearly as much time following that operation as I did the immigrant visa and also the citizenship operation.

There must have been a quarter of a million American citizens residing in Poland, most of them elderly people receiving social security or U.S. Government annuity checks. Distributing those checks was critical for those people. We also had some inevitably tragic welfare cases among this large body of American citizens.

Q: Who was the Ambassador and how did he run the operation?

SMITH: The Ambassador was John Moors Cabot, a very old-fashioned Foreign Service officer who, to his surprise, was asked at just about the same time as I became chief of the Consular Section if he would negotiate a consular convention between the United States and Poland. He had, of course, done a good deal of negotiating. He was delighted to have something like that to do, but if he had ever been a consular officer, it was 30 years earlier. He relied on me, totally, for substantive advice. I went to all of the sessions with him and was his note taker, his interpreter, and his telegram drafter afterwards. That certainly kept my time occupied during my tour of duty in Warsaw. He and his wife were also old and close friends of my then wife's parents, and so they would invite us around, perhaps somewhat more often than they would normally have invited us, to be the junior officer “fill in” at their official dinners. This was a good education and preparation for the future, too.

Q: You were in Moscow from when to when?

SMITH: 1965 to 1967.

Q: What were you doing there?

Traveling Under the KGB's Gaze

SMITH: For the first six months I was in charge of publications procurement, for which I had, during home leave in the summer of 1965, a rather interesting orientation, primarily run by CIA. CIA had an enormous interest in this program. It was legitimate espionage—that is what it was. In the course of those six months I traveled 15,000 km inside the Soviet Union, because the bookstores in Moscow—especially in Moscow, but also in Leningrad—would run out of key books which we needed to buy in bulk. We would buy as many as 30 or 40 copies of newly published books. You did not just order the books. You physically took possession of them. We had a system for this, which had been worked out with some imagination. We carried cartons with us. What is that wonderful tape that is totally unbreakable? To the absolute amazement of Soviet bookstore personnel, we would buy the books on the spot and load them into our cartons and push them on one of those rollers. We would hire a taxi for the whole day, and by the end of the day the taxi would be bulging at the seams with cartons and cartons of books.

We went to the provinces to get books which were totally unavailable in Moscow, almost immediately after publication. The more obscure the city, the better the chances that we would be able to buy these books. We were not just buying for the American intelligence community. We were also buying for the Library of Congress, public libraries, and some universities with Russian and Soviet affairs programs. So it was not just to satisfy the insatiable appetite of the intelligence “gurus” that we were engaged in this activity. It was exhausting.

[In Moscow] we did not have our German “nanny,” who refused to come with us. We had a very good Danish nanny, and my wife went with me on every one of those trips. She had enormous powers of observation. While I was beating my brains out going into bookstores, she was learning about the history and the cultural life of the given city we

visited—in all of the republics of the Soviet Union. We never got to Siberia. That is the one part of the Soviet Union which we did not visit. On one occasion we were flying from Alma Ata [Kazakhstan] back to Moscow. Because our flight had been overbooked, we were routed over the Aral Sea, the one that is almost completely dried up as a result of Soviet ecological malfeasance. It was broad daylight. First of all, no Westerner was supposed to fly over that sea. Secondly, if a Westerner had to go anywhere near the area, it was supposed to be only on a night flight. But it was daylight. My wife looked down and saw the Soviet nuclear testing site, located right next to that inland sea. I also looked and realized what it was, and I said, “Please try to remember what you are seeing.” She had an almost photographic memory. On arrival in Moscow, many hours later, we went directly to the Chancery. She sat down and drew a map of what she had seen, which was a “mini coup” for the intelligence people.

So any Foreign Service officer who had a chance to travel in the Soviet Union—and the heaviest traveler of all was the publications procurement officer—had a number of “coincidental” requests from the intelligence people. We cooperated with that sort of activity because the opportunities were so precious and rare to collect...

Q: Why did the Soviets let you get away with this?

SMITH: Letting us buy books was the price that they paid to be able to travel around the United States, buying books in the United States. They were already overwhelmed with information about the United States, but somehow they thought that they needed more. Therefore, I gather that they thought that their book buying operation was as important to them as ours was to us. In terms of the availability of the information, our operation was infinitely more important for our purposes than theirs could possibly have been to them. Theirs was also economic and technological espionage, not just political and military. They did not have much that we did not know how to do better, but it was important to them, and, therefore, they allowed us to do this.

Soviet Middle East Attitudes

At the end of six months I was assigned to the Political Section to follow Soviet relations with Western Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East—all three combined. Subsequently, the Embassy peeled these off and had separate individuals doing it. There was one person handling African relations because the Bureau of African Affairs in the Department of State at the time had a lot of money and was quite new, because independent Africa was new. The Bureau of African Affairs funded its own “slot,” so to speak, in the Political Section [in the Embassy in Moscow]. There was one person handling East Asia, who was usually a “China hand.” There was one person handling Soviet relations with Eastern Europe. I think that he belonged to “another agency” [i.e., CIA], which stands to reason. Then everything else was piled together on my platter, which made my job very, very interesting, because I maintained contact with Latin American, West European, and Middle Eastern diplomats in Moscow. At the time the Middle Eastern crisis was heating up. This was the summer and fall of 1966. The 1967 War was coming...

Q: Yes, in June, 1967...

SMITH: The Soviets were meddling and behaving very irresponsibly and, because we duly reported this and Washington already sensed this, a great deal of misguided U.S. suspicion built up, in my judgment, about the unreliability of the Soviets in any respect, as far as the Arab-Israeli conflict was concerned. That June war in 1967 “scared the pants” off the Soviets. People do not realize how close that war came to turning into World War III. It was a very, very tense time.

That war is a very interesting thing, in my opinion, in terms of the evolution of U.S.-Soviet relations, because our “little friend,” Israel, clobbered what looked to be the large and powerful armed forces of neighboring Arab states, which, with the exception of Jordan, were totally armed by the Soviet Union. So U.S. made arms smashed Soviet made arms, with a tremendous difference in odds, in terms of sheer numbers. But, in fact, the

Soviets played it well. We were declared “persona non grata” in every single Arab capital except Saudi Arabia and a couple of other countries. We had a tough time regaining the confidence of the Arabs because they chose to blame us for the Israeli success.

Q: There was also the widely believed view [in the Arab countries] that American planes had attacked the Egyptian Air Force.

SMITH: That is right. Even Jordan made accusations of that kind. It made it much easier for the Arabs to live with their humiliating defeat, if they could attribute it to a super power, and not to their little, hated neighbor. So we had a tough row to hoe after that. And between the two Middle Eastern wars, I got so interested in following Soviet activities in the Middle East that, within a year, I had shifted out of Soviet affairs and into the Middle East.

Q: Tell me, can you give me any examples of how the Soviets reacted to the Middle Eastern crisis when you were there—in terms of what you were seeing?

A Basic Soviet Change of Attitude

SMITH: Subsequently, when I was assigned to INR, I read all of the EXDIS [Exclusive Distribution] and a good deal of the NODIS [No Distribution Outside a limited list] telegraphic correspondence, covering our contacts, both planned and by chance, with Soviet officials worldwide, but particularly in Washington and Moscow. My reading of the situation was that the Soviets were so scared that they really meant it when they said, “Let us collaborate to try to contain this situation.” It is my opinion that all through the summer and fall of 1967, when the [UN] Security Council was having a terrible time hammering out a resolution on the Arab-Israeli problem to achieve some degree of stability there, the Soviets, while certainly not doing our work for us, and, in fact, occasionally disrupting what we were trying to do, were nevertheless behaving relatively responsibly. The issue of

what the negotiating history was of Resolution 242, which, as you know, was adopted in November, 1967, became critical in the U.S.-Israeli dialogue.

Many years later—in fact, in 1977 and 1978—[Secretary of State] Cyrus Vance asked me to do a paper on the negotiating history of Resolution 242. Fortunately, the NODIS telegrams could still be found. I reviewed once again the exchanges between ourselves and the British and French, but especially between ourselves and the Russians, as to the meaning of that resolution—and also our exchanges with the Israelis on the same subject. There was no question but that the resolution meant virtually total Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories [West Bank of the Jordan, Gaza, and the Golan Heights]. It certainly meant withdrawal on all fronts. Obviously, Secretary Vance was bolstered by this, because he “hung in there,” as capped by Camp David, and that is what we were cranking up for at the time.

Pardon the historical digression, but you asked me how the Soviets were behaving. I think that the war of June 1967 was a watershed in terms of relatively responsible Soviet behavior in the Middle East.

Q: Were you getting demonstrations in front of the Embassy [in Moscow] and things like that?

SMITH: Oh, yes, they could crank up one of those on a moment's notice, and they did. I remember vividly that one of the staged demonstrations we had was related to Vietnam. Yes, the Soviets would put on wonderful, real scary shows in front of the American Embassy with, maybe, 50,000 or more people, over Vietnam at that time. There were plenty of other things beside the Middle East to “churn the waters” between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Q: You were saying that the KGB sort of assigned people to be your “friends,” or something like that. How did this work and was this of any advantage to us?

KGB Methods

SMITH: I think so because, as I said before, with great misgivings the security officers at the Embassy [in Moscow] lived with the fact that we were exchanging evenings in each other's homes. Two couples who ostensibly did not know each other—they probably knew of each other; we never mentioned one to the other—were our interlocutors or social points of contact. One couple was much more impressive, brighter, and more attractive than the other—but never mind. My wife and I had gotten to know the “more attractive” couple quite well during the summer of 1959, when there were so many Westerners in Moscow that the KGB just totally lost its ability to monitor the situation. At that time these people were students and came frequently, for the sake of English practice, to the [U.S.] exhibition in Moscow. The woman did not speak any English, but the man did. We went to their apartment...

Q: This was when you were at the Exhibition?

SMITH: That is right. We went to their apartment once. Also, when his parents were away he took us to his parents' apartment which, by Soviet standards, was quite elegant. The KGB somehow had gotten wind of this and put the “squeeze” on this guy. Well, guess what, we looked him up when we came back in 1965, figuring that he would make it very clear whether this were dangerous or awkward for him. He had already been allowed to go to France several times because his hobby was automobile racing. I have forgotten the race in southern France, but...

Q: Le Mans or something like that.

SMITH: Yes, he was one of several, but very few Soviet participants in that race. So the KGB and he had made their peace long ago. In any case, he was a bright fellow. Of course, he tried very hard to say nothing to me or even share opinions with me that would be useful from my point of view. But being bright and loquacious, he could not help it. I

think that Uncle Sam got a lot more out of these visits back and forth than the KGB did. I would simply report the man's views and opinions—that was all. There were so few such contacts. It is hard for anybody living today to imagine what a thorough job the KGB did in cutting off normal, informal, human contacts between our representatives in Moscow and the Soviet public. So each and every fragment of semi-relaxed, human contact was potentially quite valuable in terms of insights—that is all.

Q: Who was the Ambassador then?

SMITH: We had two. The first one was Foy Kohler. The second was Llewellyn K. “Tommy” Thompson.

A Soviet Specialty in the Foreign Service

Q: Could you talk a little about your impression of those two men?

SMITH: Foy Kohler was a scrappy, vigorous little man—a very small guy. He was quite popular at the Embassy [in Moscow]. Thompson was sent back [to Moscow] after Kohler left [the post]. He had been the Ambassador before Kohler. Thompson was a very shy, reserved man. He had spent more time working on Soviet affairs than Foy Kohler had. I do not think he wanted to be there at all. We got to know his wife, who is a delightful person, fairly well. I do not know what else I can tell you about their tours there. I was sufficiently junior that I did not see all that much of them, though I saw them on a personal basis, particularly the Thompsons, again because they were old friends of my in-laws [Mr. and Mrs. Ted Achilles].

That relationship made me very nervous, I should mention, during the first eight years of my Foreign Service career because I did not want anyone among my peers ever to think that anything I achieved in the Foreign Service could possibly have been in part because of this family connection. And I do not think that it was. But it did give me a leg up on others as a learning experience in the sense that in my 20's and 30's I was

meeting with very senior people on an informal, relaxed basis. Sometimes it would just be Thompson and his wife, and my wife and myself, for supper at Spaso House [residence of the American Ambassador in Moscow]. This gave me a sense of the thinking and style of senior people in the Foreign Service, which could only be beneficial.

Q: How would you characterize morale of the Embassy [in Moscow] at that time? The morale of our Embassy in Moscow seems to wax and wane.

SMITH: I do not think that the morale of our Embassy in Moscow was ever a serious problem, though I could be wrong, until the late 1970's and the early 1980's. I attribute that deterioration of morale in Moscow to a slippage in the interest of the Foreign Service in Soviet affairs. I do not know what that was all about, either, because the Soviets continued to be our main contestant for world influence. When I came into [the Service]—I do not know whether you share this opinion—I found that there were very good people who fought like panthers to get involved in Soviet affairs. I considered myself extremely lucky to be in Moscow.

Q: This was the elite there of one type. There were several such groups, but I would...

SMITH: It was one of the choice activities for people in the political field at the time. It was one of the more interesting areas to be in, and the culmination of work in Soviet affairs was to get yourself assigned to Moscow. So I do not think that there was a person there who was not glad to be there. Administrative people were glad to be there. Some of them were trained in the Russian language and some not, at that time. I think that morale in Moscow was high because it was such a plum to get to go there. Life was difficult at the Embassy, but everyone was well forewarned about that, and so no one could be surprised about the U.S. self-imposed rules, not to mention the success of the KGB in interfering with any kind of normal relationships. I think that the morale problem came later and I think it came up because people were not falling all over themselves to get assigned to Moscow. Some

people went there rather reluctantly. Then the tough conditions—there was no psychic reward for the tough conditions for those people.

Q: So you left there in...

Political - Reporting Dissent

SMITH: 1967. Before we leave Moscow, could I return to one thing that I remember that is of no great consequence, but you asked me what my personal reading was of Soviet behavior in the Middle East? I said that the Soviets really changed before and after that war [the Arab-Israeli War of 1967]. Probably for many other reasons they wanted to collaborate with the United States in at least one important region of the world. It was impossible to do this in East Asia because of Vietnam, and so the Middle East was a candidate as an experiment on the part of the Soviet Union in trying to establish themselves as a legitimate interlocutor with the United States. The Soviets had great ambitions—really from World War II on—to play a respectable role in the world, if we would let them. So Middle East diplomacy after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War became their chosen area to try to “cozy up” to us and to gain prestige. In any case there were reasons why the Soviets were behaving reasonably responsibly, in my judgment.

I became sufficiently concerned about the prevalent view in our government, based on pre-1967 War Soviet activities in the Middle East, that the Soviets were continuing to be totally ruthless and untrustworthy, that I stayed up nights, writing a paper based on unclassified materials, namely, Foreign Broadcast Information Service [FBIS] transcriptions, of Middle Eastern broadcasts in the two months leading up to the 1967 War. I tried to show that a good deal of what was assumed to be Soviet mischief was, in fact, an effort on the part of the Arabs, including our friends, not only the radical Arabs, but including the Saudis, the Jordanians, and other conservative Arab regimes, to get the super powers involved in that problem. The Soviets, obviously, did not have anything to do with it, in the case of the Saudis and Jordanians. The Soviets did not even have an

embassy in Saudi Arabia, as you know, until very recently. I wrote this paper to show that we were going overboard in our inclination to blame all kinds of problems in the Middle East on Soviet mischief. The outgoing chief of the Political Section [in the Embassy in Moscow]—Gene Boster—suppressed it. He was a man whom I liked very much, but he was afraid of his shadow and he was not going to “buck” Washington, even though he may very well have been persuaded [that this view was right].

In came David Klein, about a week before I left the post [Moscow]. Now that I think of it, it was not Gene Boster—I am being unfair. It was Alex Akalovsky, who was acting chief of the Political Section...

Q: And a very famous translator...

SMITH: That is right. He was an astute observer. Obviously, despite his language skills—he wrote English well—he was one of the most nervous bureaucrats. I liked Alex. He was my immediate boss throughout my tour in the Political Section. Then he became acting chief of the Political Section when Boster left. It took a month to write this report after the June 1967 War. Akalovsky would not allow the report to move forward.

David Klein arrived about four days before I left Moscow. I became a very good, amazingly good friend of Klein's. He was a controversial figure and a strong-willed individual who made his reputation, I think, in his next tour as, in effect, chief of the Political Section in West Berlin [USBER]. There was nothing in East Berlin then. I think that Klein finally sent the report to Washington. Anyhow, I thought that that was worth mentioning on two accounts: one, suppression of reporting, which does not happen any more, at least in theory; and, secondly, it reinforces my point that the June 1967 War really was a watershed in Soviet behavior in the Middle East.

MID-CAREER YEARS: Challenging The Accepted Thinking(1969-1979) The U.S.-USSR Middle East Talks

Q: Well, then, what happened to you after you left Moscow?

SMITH: I was assigned to INR for two years to the Soviet part of INR under Helmut Sonnenfeldt, who was running it then. He was an interesting character. I was given the Middle Eastern portfolio [in the Soviet part of INR].

As you may recall, the Soviets kept trying to engage us throughout 1968 in major power talks about the Arab-Israeli problem. This is what the Arabs wanted them to do, to spare them having to negotiate with Israel. They wanted the Soviets to work out a deal with the Americans and to bring in the British and French if necessary. We resisted this, but the Soviets kept inching closer to the Israeli position in these highly confidential discussions. I was called in on New Year's Eve 1968 by Sonnenfeldt and sent to Roy Atherton [then Director of Arab-Israeli Affairs in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs—NEA]. Atherton was already Joe Sisco's right hand man. Joe Sisco was shifting from the position of Assistant Secretary of State for UN Affairs to the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. The Soviet Ambassador [to the U.S.] had come in once again on or about December 29, 1968, with still another position paper on the Arab-Israeli problem and had delivered it to the Under Secretary of State. I was sent by Sonnenfeldt to be of assistance to Atherton in analyzing what the Soviets were up to.

That fired my interest. Atherton was able to gain access to the NODIS [telegram file]. Over the next three months I went furiously through every recorded conversation between senior U.S. and Soviet officials and also second hand reports from our people of Soviet discussions with Western officials. Generally, my objective was to tabulate the evolving Soviet position on the substance of the Arab-Israeli points of contention. I distinctly sensed a progression between 1967 and the beginning of 1969. I wrote this paper, listing all the Arab-Israeli points of contention and showing an evolution of Soviet classified posturing in our direction. I also did a tabulation of published Soviet positions on these issues to show

how much daylight there was between their diplomatic stance and their public, propaganda stance.

Sisco suddenly was called in because the Soviet Ambassador—Dobrynin—came [to the Department of State]. Out of this flowed what were called the Sisco-Dobrynin talks on the Middle East. These began in March 1969. Sisco was given the “green light” from Secretary of State William Rogers to start, on a tentative basis, secret talks with Dobrynin on the Middle East. The Israelis did not know about them, and SOV [Office of Soviet Affairs in the Department of State] did not even know about them, at first. Sisco wanted an assessment, at the outset of these talks, of the Soviet position. And guess what? Intuitively, I had done just what he needed. Sisco yanked me out of INR, and I worked for Sisco intensively for the following eight months, together with Roy Atherton, as one of the three participants in the Sisco-Dobrynin talks on the Middle East. For a relatively junior officer—I was, I guess, 39 years old—this was a heady experience. We went to Moscow and met with Andrei Gromyko [Soviet Foreign Minister] for two weeks because the Soviets, for reasons of “amour propre” [self esteem] had to be able to say that the talks were also taking place in Moscow and not only in Washington. We stayed in Spaso House. Jacob Beam was our Ambassador to the Soviet Union—this was in the summer of 1969, my last visit to Moscow, I am sorry to say. But staying in Spaso House was fun, too, per se. That was one of the most important moments in my Foreign Service career.

An Intelligence Perspective

Q: Before we get to what you were seeing going on, may we go quickly back to INR? Sonnenfeldt was your immediate superior. He's a figure that keeps cropping up in foreign policy matters.

SMITH: He is a senior personage today.

Q: How did you read him at the time? How did he operate at that time?

SMITH: Sonnenfeldt was a very smooth operator. He is an astute, political animal. I do not think that he believed for an instant in my view that the Soviets were behaving relatively responsibly and that it behooved the United States to hear them out and see what kind of relationship we could work out with them. I think that he was instinctively very suspicious of the Soviets then and, until not too many years ago, continued to be rather a “hard liner.” He saw that I had a commodity which was in demand, as far as the Secretary of State was concerned, and he pushed me to a fare-thee-well. That is how I got into the Sisco-Atherton operation. Sonnenfeldt pushed me in their direction. I think he must have felt that, from a political point of view, it was going to be very helpful to him. Actually, the minute I “belonged” to Sisco, I did not “belong” to Sonnenfeldt any more, although on paper I did for about six months. Then Sisco eventually had me assigned to NEA.

Q: From your point of view, what did you see in those secret Soviet-American talks on the Middle East? What were the major points and how did they develop?

SMITH: In light of the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict since then, the points at issue seem ludicrous, but, based on the history of the question up to that time, they were not so funny. The Soviets were twisting the arm of the Egyptians, in particular. The Soviets cleared their position with the Egyptians each step of the way. We gave the Israelis only a general idea of what we were up to. We did not clear our position with the Israelis. I guess we thought that that would create too big a row. We were going to have a showdown with the Israelis when and if we ever got to the point of what we considered a balanced or tentative arrangement with the Soviets. We knew, from intelligence that I cannot go into —incontrovertible intelligence—that the Soviets were twisting the Egyptians' arm. Since I still had an INR “portfolio,” I was able to have access to certain rarefied intelligence. It was just fascinating to me to see what the Soviets were doing. They were moving very slowly, playing “hard ball” with the Egyptians—but they were moving. And so were we.

Then the “deep penetration raids” began after the first U.S. “Phantom” jets [F-4 fighters] arrived in Israel, in September 1969. To our dismay the Israelis began using these planes

to do “dare-devil” things across the Suez Canal. By October 1969 they were bombing targets around Cairo, if you remember.

Q: The “war of attrition...”

SMITH: Yes, indeed, and the windows were rattling in the American School [in Cairo]. We complained to the Israelis, and they said, “Move your school.” [Laughter] They were not about to stop bombing Cairo for our convenience. I guess, in retrospect, that I can understand that, but it sounded a little arrogant at the time.

Soviet Military Intervention in the Middle East

After that the Soviets introduced Soviet pilots because the Egyptians were being humiliated. Gradually, Soviet planes began pushing the Israeli air campaign back. The United States was so upset by this, in late 1969, that we broke off the U.S.-Soviet talks. We knew that this was something that meant more to them than it did to us, at least potentially. So, I suppose, we figured that this was a way of showing them how angry we were at what they were doing in Egypt. You can hardly blame them for what they were doing in Egypt. If you reverse the situation—if the Soviets had been the “sponsor” of Israel and we had been the “sponsor” of Egypt—you know perfectly well that there would have been U.S. pilots in there. So it was really the pot calling the kettle black, I thought. It was foolish of us to break off the talks. The Soviets resisted doing anything to help the Egyptians until Nasser blew the whistle on them. Nasser died in September, 1970!

There was an interplay between the situation on the ground in the area, which the Israelis really provoked, and our ability to continue any kind of dialogue with the Soviets. So, of course, anything the Soviets had to say, starting in 1970, was suspect, and instead of making any further effort with the Soviets, we launched what became known as the “Jarring Initiative,” which the Israelis made sure would fail, and which did by March or April 1970. At that point Joe Sisco, who had an extraordinarily fertile imagination, dreamt up the so-called “Proximity Talks.” He tried to get an Israeli and Egyptian to sit on different floors

in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. He was going to run back and forth [between them]. The effort to organize the “Proximity Talks” continued through 1970 and 1971 and gradually sputtered out after the change of administrations in 1972, with Henry Kissinger's arrival on the scene [as Secretary of State].

Kissinger, Sonnenfeldt, and Sisco

Kissinger went through an interesting metamorphosis on the Arab-Israeli problem, which blew up in his face, as you know, in the fall of 1973. All of a sudden he realized that a) this problem was much more important than he had understood, and b) there were two sides to the story. In fairness to Kissinger he achieved what seemed impossible at the time because he concentrated on the problem. He saw what were legitimate Israeli concerns and what were wholly exaggerated Israeli concerns. He was able to deal with this in a balanced way. But there was nothing balanced in Kissinger's attitude toward the Arab-Israeli problem when he came on board as National Security Adviser. He was so totally preoccupied with trying to wind down the Vietnam War that he would not allow any initiatives to be taken on the Arab-Israeli problem.

Fortunately for me, in mid-1971 I was assigned as chief of the Political Section in the embassy in Tel Aviv [Israel], and so I was spared the agony of the slow death of Joe Sisco's initiative, the so-called “Proximity Talks.”

Q: Tell us a little about Joe Sisco—how he operated.

SMITH: Well, Joe Sisco and Hal Sonnenfeldt had something very important in common, and that was that they were both political animals. As you know, most career Foreign Service officers are not political animals. Neither of them was career Foreign Service. That may have something to do with it. They understood “the game,” so to speak, between the agencies in Washington. They accurately sensed what was on the mind of the White House, and they sought out “targets of opportunity.” I am not trying to suggest that either man was intellectually dishonest. I am simply saying that they played U.S. domestic

politics, at least “Washington Insider” politics, to try to achieve what they wanted to do. Most of us career Foreign Service people are allergic to doing that kind of thing. That is why I draw a certain parallel between Sisco and Sonnenfeldt. They were “operators.”

But Sisco was also an extraordinarily clever man who managed to keep all kinds of balls up in the air at once. That was one of his methods. He would meet with foreign ambassadors—at least two or three a day—and cultivate the ear off these guys for an hour. He was throwing sand in people's eyes—deliberately, in many cases. He was getting messages back to the Soviets, in some cases; he was trying to manipulate the French and British, with some success, in other cases; and he was trying to influence the White House in still other cases. I was one of his regular note takers, and after a while I began to see the method in his madness. The guy worked about 18 hours a day. He was an indefatigable operator. He did not speak correct English. I could never get over the fact that such a bright person—he had a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago—would make egregious errors, like: “I'm glad that this has happened to you and I,” and that kind of grammatical error. That is uniquely American. You would never find a British official at that level, with his brilliance, making that kind of hash out of the English language. Pardon the digression.

Q: No, it gives us a feel for the man.

SMITH: He was a rough diamond—let us put it that way. He came out of the poorer part of Chicago. He was tough. He was hard on people who, he felt, had let him down. He was loyal to people who, he thought, were supporting him. So he was a controversial person within the Foreign Service, not to mention within the interagency bureaucracy. I never ceased to admire and like the man, even though we did not have much in common at the time except a burning interest in the same general set of problems.

Major-Power Concern About the Middle East

SMITH: There is a strong case to be made a) that we had a good chance, not so much to solve the Arab-Israeli problem after the 1967 War, but certainly to move the situation light-years ahead in terms of the security of Israel and the normalization of the problem. And we missed the boat. It can be demonstrated, in minute detail, that the first Israeli-Egyptian disengagement agreement, which was no mean achievement on the part of Henry Kissinger in January 1974, was almost identical to an arrangement which Sisco, the Israelis, and the Egyptians were moving toward in the spring of 1970. A lot of thought had gone into the preparation of U.S. positions and thinking through how such a partial disengagement could work in the Sinai area back in 1970-71. This material was just dusted off and handed to Henry Kissinger. He was the man, more than any other U.S. official, who made sure it did not happen in 1970-71. He had the benefit of some careful thought when he went into those disengagement...

Q: Well, now, this brings up a point which has cropped up other times, talking of Henry Kissinger. You say that he made sure that it didn't happen in 1970 or so. Was this because he wasn't involved?

SMITH: He says in his own memoirs that he deeply resented the fact that Nixon would not let him get involved in the Arab-Israeli problem for two reasons: 1) Kissinger is Jewish. Nixon is a life-long anti-Semite and was very distrustful of Kissinger's ability to be objective. Let us face it. Until he learned more about the problem, he was not objective. But that was not the only reason that Nixon kept Kissinger out of the Arab-Israeli problem, before he became Secretary of State. 2) The other reason is that, behind the scenes, he was giving Kissinger a free hand to run circles around Secretary of State [Rogers] in every other field. He [Nixon] felt he had to reserve something for the self-respect of William Rogers. The Sisco-Dobrynin talks became known as the Rogers-Dobrynin talks. Without much justification Secretary of State Rogers claimed credit for such progress as was initially achieved in those Two-Power Talks. At the same time we had the Four-Power

Talks going on in New York, in which Bob Oakley was involved up to his ears. Have you interviewed him?

Q: Partly. I haven't gotten too far with the White House on that...

SMITH: I think you should. [Oakley] is a very bright guy who was very much involved in some terribly important developments, and so I hope you are able to pin him down.

Q: You were there viewing Israeli operations. We always had the feeling that the Israelis could play the domestic political card or something like that. Did you feel that they were looking for a compromise?

SMITH: No. They were not looking for a compromise. They had all this territory, and it enabled them to avoid any kind of difficult decisions. They had total distrust of the Arabs—even beyond that which was justified. Obviously, a good measure of distrust of the Arabs was justified. But the Israelis were blind on the subject. They certainly did use the U.S. domestic political card to try to nip U.S. initiatives in the bud, frequently with success, although Sisco gave them a real run for their money.

I have a wonderful story to tell you—let us save it for next time—when Sisco outmaneuvered the Israelis and I heard Golda Meir calling him [by telephone] from Jerusalem and telling him that what he had done was absolutely outrageous. He had spoken for Israel to the Soviets. This was the cease-fire-standstill agreement of August 1970—the time he stopped Soviet and Israeli pilots from shooting each other down over the Suez Canal. Sisco really deserves a lot of credit for pulling that off. He had to “out-fox” the Israelis to do it. Mrs. Meir swore at him on the telephone and said, “There is no way in heaven that Israel is going to abide by this arrangement.” Guess what? The Israelis did abide by the arrangement, and it gave them a nice, long, misleading period of tranquility which I soon got to see from the other end, because I was then assigned to Israel.

Israeli Suspicion of U.S. Officials

Q: Today is May 26, 1993. Walter, we left you when you were off to Israel. Could you explain how that assignment came about?

SMITH: After about six months of being “parked” in various corners of NEA, while I was working with Assistant Secretary Sisco in connection with the U.S.-Soviet Middle East Talks, I finally was “parked” on the Israeli Desk for about six months, in early 1970. I then spent a year as Deputy Director of Egyptian Affairs but, because I had worked both sides of the equation, I was deemed a satisfactory person to send to Israel—and I was sent there as chief of the Political Section. In light of the fact that major power peace efforts had stalled it made a certain amount of sense to have someone in the Embassy in Israel who was familiar with them, on the chance that [such talks] might get cranked up again.

What I was starting to address—what I mentioned last time and may have started to address—was the feeling, that you rightly asked me about, of being “beleaguered” in Washington, at a time when Israel became extremely nervous about U.S. intentions in the Middle East and was fearful that the United States might come up with a persuasive-seeming kind of equation—and then insist that Israel struggle with it, in terms of an Arab-Israeli settlement. One does indeed feel beleaguered in Washington because of the power of the pro-Israeli lobby.

What I discovered very early on, when I arrived in Israel, was something that I had not expected. That is, the Israelis—rational and logical people though they are—in fact are quite emotional and irrational on the subject of the Arab-Israeli conflict. They were dead sincere—not conniving and devious—in their efforts to stop diplomatic activities which they honestly believed spelled only danger and [even] ruin for Israel. That is a lesson which anyone assigned to the Embassy in Israel ought to understand, because you realize that, rational as your discussions may be with Israeli colleagues and as soon happened with Israeli friends, there were certain areas, particularly during your first few months of

assignment to Israel, where you “pulled your punches,” lest the Israelis, who were also sizing you up, as a friend or a foe of Israel, get the wrong idea.

Now a little “black book,” in effect, is made on newly arrived diplomats—above all on American diplomats—as to whether the individual is sympathetic or not sympathetic to Israel's plight.

Q: I've heard this again and again, but not in quite as strong terms as you are using. Well, since this is very important and since this is a thread running through the whole situation, were you told this before you went to Israel?

SMITH: I had been told this but I did not believe it, because in Washington you become convinced that the Israelis are cynical, after you have been hit on the head and shoulders by all kinds of clever political operations. It is only when you get there that you realize that it is not cynicism at all. It is mortal fear of the imminent destruction of Israel. There is no Israel citizen who goes to sleep at night without wondering whether his country will be at war the next day. If you look at the map—the Israelis say this in a coy fashion: “Look at the map and you'll understand the problem.” But it really is true. It is a tiny, tiny country. The minute you understand this, then you understand where the Israelis are coming from. You do not ever agree with them if you have studied the problem, but you certainly have to be sympathetic to them. Only by being sympathetic to them, without necessarily agreeing with them, will you ever get anywhere with them, if you have to nudge and cajole them in directions that they are fearful of.

I had a high success rate in Israel. When I came back [to Washington], I became Director of Israeli Affairs.

Q: First of all, let's talk about what your job was [in the Embassy in Tel Aviv].

SMITH: I was chief of the Political Section.

The American Embassy in Israel

Q: How was the Embassy set up? Who were the Ambassador and the DCM?

SMITH: The Ambassador was Walworth Barbour, who, at that point, had been there for 10-14 years. He remained there for the first two of my three years. In my third year he was replaced by Kenneth Keating, a former U.S. Senator [Republican, from New York]. Ambassador Barbour was very ill. He only made it to the office for one or two hours a day. He was drinking heavily and smoking very heavily. He had serious lung problems. The man could barely breathe.

Q: Then why was he kept on in what is considered one of our "high tension" posts? Certainly...

SMITH: I have read some of Barbour's reporting during the early years of his assignment there, when he retained his objectivity. When he was convinced that the Israelis were wrong, he did not hesitate to say so, both to them and, especially, to Washington. But by the time I got there, Barbour had begun to lose a) his objectivity about Israel and b) his intellectual sharpness. I do not like to say things about such an esteemed character, but he was almost ineffective.

The DCM during the first two years I was there was Owen Zurhellen, a fantastic individual who recently died, I gather. He was a "crackerjack" officer—very abrasive and disliked by the people [in the Embassy] because he was blunt and abrasive. But he was effective. He and I were very dissimilar in personality but we took to each other. Thank goodness. Because he really was very dubious about whether I was going to "cut the mustard" during the first couple of months I was there. I worked my tail off—not because I wanted to have a good relationship with him but because the assignment was so challenging to me. At the end of three months he called me in and said: "I am surprised to find myself saying this to you, but I want you to know that you are doing a good job." And so it went.

These were the halcyon days when the Israelis lived in never-never land, thinking that the 1967 War had solved their problems and that war was not going to come at any time soon. Israel was enjoying unheard of prosperity.

Q: What was the period when you were there [in Israel]?

SMITH: I was there from 1971 to 1974. So I saw the unrealism of Israeli thinking that preceded the 1973 War and the devastating psychological effect of the 1973 War which, as you know, the Israelis won. And if we had let them go, as often happens with those wars, they would have won it on both Syrian and Egyptian fronts with a resounding bang. We pulled their punches for them. They won the wars, but the Egyptians and the Syrians were not convinced that they were defeated. Henry Kissinger had “seen the light.” In a very short span of time he realized that if there was any hope of reaching some kind of accommodation after this war, the Israelis could not be allowed to occupy Damascus and Cairo. So Kissinger had something to do with the fact that we and the Soviets—as had happened in 1967—imposed a cease-fire just as the Israelis were finally regaining their strength and getting ready to do something.

Q: Going back to when you arrived [in Israel]. Here you've arrived, you have to pull your punches, you can't overly engage Israelis without their feeling that you're not “with them.”

SMITH: Which you can on lots of issues, but there are certain “gut” issues.

Q: But you have to watch it at the same time. You've got a DCM who's effectively running the Embassy, who's putting you on trial...

SMITH: Right.

Q: Everything you write is going to end up on the desk of a pro-Israeli Senator, probably.

SMITH: Well, I do not think that it was that bad, though it could be...

Q: It could. It could also wind up—I mean, you've got all of these minefields.

Political Reporting on Israel and the Palestinians

SMITH: You just work extremely hard and do your best. I found living in Israel exhilarating. My garbage collector had a Ph.D. degree, spoke four languages, and was a very charming man, indeed. There are, of course, a great many poorly educated and not very refined Israelis—mainly those of recent Arab extraction [the Sephardim]. But certainly the European Israelis [the Ashkenazim] at this time—in 1971—ran the whole place and were the people one dealt with and ran into. There were certain slum areas in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem inhabited by a different kind of Israeli. But the Israelis I knew were bright, extroverted, energetic, creative, talented, and very, very entertaining and funny people. I adored being there, and this showed—and thank goodness that it did. Because I think that that helped to persuade the Israelis that a) I was someone enjoyable to know and b) I was on their side. It was a fabulous experience.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the reporting. I've talked to other people who say that if you're reporting a telegram or a cable or a despatch—whatever one is sending out—a lot of it is not stating just plain fact. It's also trying to accomplish something at the other end. Here you were in this highly charged atmosphere. No matter what the State Department did, Congress or the White House could overturn it for political reasons. Things could leak. How did you and the officers working for you deal with this?

SMITH: Well, I think you are referring in particular to reporting on the Israeli internal political situation.

Q: Yes.

SMITH: In this case we handled it with absolute intellectual honesty. Israeli politics are vibrant, very fractious, and very open. There is, of course, some back room dealing, but, by and large, Israeli politics are quite open. It is quite a contest. Israelis are quite willing

to talk to foreigners, particularly if they take the trouble to learn Hebrew and already know a good deal on the subject. They are delighted to talk about the political situation and give their views and their opponents' views. If an Israeli—a senior Israeli figure, for that matter—had seen what we were reporting a) he would not have had any major disagreement with its accuracy and b) he certainly would not have had any question about our motivation. We were simply trying to describe what was happening and analyze where things might go. I had four or five political officers. Most of them were working on different segments of the Israeli internal scene. At least initially, I concentrated on Israeli external affairs. The Israelis had lost their relationship with most African countries, thanks to the 1967 War, but they still had diplomatic relations with some African countries and a lot of Asian countries. They had an interesting relationship with West European countries and North America. It was interesting to get the Israeli perspective, not only on the Israeli bilateral relationship with those countries but the Israeli perception of where things were heading in the European Community—remember, this was 20 years ago—and to get the Israeli view of economic developments in North America and East Asia.

It was interesting. So I reported this stuff with considerable care. What else can I tell you? The one member of our Political Section who might have gotten the Israelis' dander up, who spoke both Hebrew and Arabic, Wat Cluverius, covered the occupied territories beat and also Israeli domestic Arab population developments. You realize that there are almost one million Arabs who were born in Israel and are Israeli citizens. They have become a real problem. At that time those people were not disaffected. They were quite loyal [to Israel]. We tried to stay in touch with them. We certainly wanted to know what was going on in that community. We never did anything that any Israeli had any right to be suspicious of. But if they were going to be suspicious of anything that the Political Section did, it would have been our relationships with Israeli Arabs and especially with those from the West Bank and Gaza. And we also took turns visiting the West Bank and Gaza. My wife and children and I would go down every three to six months and stay in the Gaza Strip which, at that time, it was possible to do.

Q: Well, how about the West Bank? We've talked about the relationship in reporting with our Consulate General in Jerusalem.

SMITH: The West Bank [of the Jordan River] was part of Jerusalem's consular district. You are quite right. The Embassy also tried to understand what was going on in the West Bank area, not for reporting purposes, since it was Jerusalem's prerogative, but more so that we would understand what the Israelis were talking about, when they referred to their problems on the West Bank. I am glad you reminded me of that. The Consulate General in Jerusalem then—and, I am sure, still today—is responsible for reporting on internal developments on the West Bank. The Gaza Strip was the Embassy's responsibility. I do not know whether that division of labor continues.

Q: I'm not sure either.

SMITH: To the extent that the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinians in the West Bank can do anything in unison, which is somewhat doubtful, then it makes sense for one U.S. post to do the reporting. These were relatively calm times in Israel—those last two years before the outbreak of the so-called “Yom Kippur War” in October 1973. As I said at the outset, this was an economically vibrant time. The Israeli economy just grew like Topsy during that period. It was a good time to be there. Naturally, it led astray those of us who had only been in Israel during those two years. We found that out, as the Israelis themselves did, when it all came a cropper in October 1973.

Q: How did we look upon the Likud Party, Menachem Begin, and his supporters at that point?

SMITH: We did not take them very seriously. We did maintain some contact with them. In fact, to my amusement, people whom I had for dinner in my home ended up by being members of the Israeli cabinet during the several years that the Likud Party was in power. The betting was that the Likud Party was not going to be able to come to power any time

soon. As you recall, it was not until 1977 that Likud came to power for the first time in the history of Israel. So we certainly paid attention to the opposition and kept track of them. One of my political officers used to say, partly with tongue in cheek but not entirely so, that it might be a better thing for both the United States and Israel if Likud did come to power.

The Labor Party was, first of all, in its heart of hearts, ambivalent about the [efforts to achieve peace between Arabs and Israelis] that we were forever promoting. Labor was dubious that peace, in fact, could be made with the Arabs. However, the Labor Party was clever about sounding “reasonable” on these issues and sounding as if it were ready to compromise, if only given the chance. Because the Labor Party was so sophisticated, the United States would listen to its advice and would sometimes compromise efforts that we were trying to make to accommodate their views. In fact, to some extent we were emasculated. This [political] officer's thesis was that if Likud ever came to power, it would “come right out with it” and would articulate the fears that the Labor Party also had about peacemaking and the future. They would call a spade a spade. And then the United States would have “to get off the dime,” if we ever did get to a situation where we had our hands on a balanced compromise with the Arabs as a possibility. If the Israelis tried to walk out of it, we would have to put some real body pressure to Israel. It would have been a hard thing for us to bring ourselves to do with Labor, this officer argued, whereas with a Likud [government], if that moment ever came, it would be so abrasive that it would not be so hard for the United States to do what it had to do.

In reality, to his everlasting credit, President Carter personally persuaded Menachem Begin that the Sinai deal and the interim arrangement for the West Bank and Gaza were in Israel's interest. I know that Begin had tremendous misgivings [about these arrangements], but, by dint of sheer personality, I think that Jimmy Carter turned the leader of the Likud movement into a supporter of the Camp David arrangements. So it never did come to a question of push and shove between the United States and Israel.

However, there was plenty of pushing and shoving between the United States and Israel during the period in office of Secretary of State Kissinger, just to get the Israelis to agree to those two disengagement agreements: one with Egypt and one with Syria, and then the second agreement with Egypt. There should have been an agreement with Jordan while there was a chance. Kissinger knew that, but that would have been very tough to carry out.

Q: You were sitting there, reading an awful lot of the telegrams coming out of Egypt, Jordan, and Damascus—I mean, from our Embassies.

SMITH: We did not even have a U.S.-staffed Interests Section in Damascus from the 1967 war until after the 1973 war.

Q: We had an Interests Section in Cairo. What was your impression? Was it "us" versus "them?" I'm talking about two Foreign Service posts.

SMITH: You were getting two different perspectives. Even pro-Arab people who may have served in Tel Aviv—and there have not been many because most people who have been assigned to Tel Aviv, no matter what their background—have been, as I was, rather fascinated by the Israeli people and sympathetic to the perceived Israeli plight. Anyhow, you were getting two perspectives. We, naturally, even when we did not fully agree with the Israeli point of view, tried to report accurately and sympathetically, with the thought in mind that Washington could never do its job if it did not hear both sides of the argument. Obviously, our colleagues in the Arab countries were reporting with some degree of skepticism regarding current Arab points of view on the same issues. But we never got into "pissing" matches between Foreign Service personnel reporting on Arab politics and those reporting on Israeli politics.

We knew many of the individuals concerned. There were occasional regional get togethers of reporting officers in Cyprus, covering this area. I think that that only happened once in my time. That was enormously helpful. In the past it had happened that the American

Embassy in Cairo and the American Embassy in Tel Aviv engaged in a “feud,” if you will. There was a danger of friction between the reporting sections of the Embassy in Tel Aviv and the Consulate General in Jerusalem, which has always tended to be quite unfriendly to the Israelis and sympathetic to the Palestinians. That is the job of the Consulate General in Jerusalem. Our colleagues in Jerusalem sometimes seemed to feel that the deck was so heavily stacked against the Palestinians that they were fighting an uphill battle. That was not necessarily the case. We would sometimes call them up and say, “You have got to realize that your reporting [on some particular issue] is not entirely accurate. We do not want to point that out in a telegram to Washington, but we want you to reconsider what you are saying on this particular issue.” That sometimes helped, but it sometimes did not. The greatest danger was to have a feud going on between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Q: Which has happened.

SMITH: It has happened, rather often, in the past. It did not happen on my watch. I had a few bouts of knocking heads with the Consul General in Jerusalem.

Q: Who was Consul General then?

SMITH: It was Pete Day.

Q: Well, now, I didn't interview him. Someone else interviewed him.

SMITH: Where is he now—do you know?

Q: He's here in Washington. You had this very open society in Israel, and maybe it's gotten worse or better. The Israeli intelligence service is well known for its disinformation. It can muddy the waters if there's a problem...

SMITH: Not inside Israel, it can not.

Q: Not inside Israel, but outside Israel. Did you find that the Israeli intelligence operation was a problem for you or not?

SMITH: No, I do not recall any such instance. I have no doubt that the Israeli military intelligence operation was running circles around Uncle Sam, but as far as political intelligence and political disinformation are concerned, I do not recall an instance where this affected what we were trying to do.

Israeli Leaders; the U.S. Military and Israel

Q: Who was the [Israeli] Prime Minister at the time—was it Golda Meir?

SMITH: It was Golda Meir, right up to shortly before my departure in 1974. She finally stepped down, and Rabin became Prime Minister—in the spring of 1974.

Q: What was your reading of Golda Meir and also of Rabin?

SMITH: Golda Meir was a very impressive personality, a very strong willed person, tough as nails but tired, a fine brain—not a very refined person but a very intricate, competent person. My Hebrew was not good enough to tell whether she had an atrocious American accent in her Hebrew, but she must have had, because her English had the strongest Milwaukee accent that you have ever heard. It must have made those who speak British-accented English wince to hear her talk. Just as, I gather, Abba Eban had a rather British accent in his Hebrew. As he was an intellectual, I gather that he spoke a rather purist, classical Hebrew, which made people chuckle when they heard him on the radio. Golda Meir was just as tough as nails.

The 1973 War threw her for a real loop because she had so completely failed to anticipate it. Just after that war Kissinger said—how did he put it? It was clever. He said that the Israelis had “brain-washed themselves” [convinced themselves] that the Arabs were incapable of launching a surprise, coordinated attack on Israel. And then the Israelis

turned around and “brain-washed us” into thinking the same thing. That is exactly what happened.

Q: We'll get to the 1973 War later. I assume that you shared information with our military attach# and our Agency [CIA] people.

SMITH: They read our output. We did not read their output.

Q: Well, let's just take the military side. Were they pretty well captives—were they impressed by the Israeli military and sort of bought their whole story?

SMITH: I do not think so. Most of the people serving on the attach# staffs were very much impressed by the Israeli military. They were amazed by the ability of Israel, working with such comparatively limited resources, compared to our own, to pull off such extraordinary feats—in all three branches, but especially in the air. They were impressed, but they were not captives of the Israeli point of view because, I think, all of them—before coming to Israel—had worked on the military dimensions of the Middle East problem. If anything, they tended to be very uncomfortable about the ability of Israel to get in the way of Pentagon planning for “the big show”—namely, dealing with the Soviets. In terms of U.S.-Soviet rivalry, Israel has never been an asset. Israel has always been a liability. Nobody ever dared say this, but it is just a fact.

If you look at it very carefully, you will see why I say this. The Israelis had tremendous military capabilities, but they would not be of any major value in stopping the Soviets. They certainly were capable of getting into a tremendous ruckus with the Arabs which could provide a beautiful opening for the Soviets to come into the area. As we were saying in the last interview, that was beginning to happen along the Suez Canal in 1969 and 1970. Fortunately, Joe Sisco turned that off, just in time. The Israeli and Soviet pilots were shooting each other down. That created really serious problems for the Pentagon.

So the military attach#s we had in Israel really worked. They were pressed professionally by their Israeli counterparts. Of course, they liked them as human beings, but they were also worried about Israel's ability inadvertently to cause huge defense problems for the United States.

The CIA people were not reporting on Israel during that time. I do not know whether that is still the case or not. They had an understanding with the Israelis that they would not report or conduct covert operations in Israel. They exchanged views with the Israelis on Arab problems and so they were not, really, part of the equation.

What else could I mention? The FBI briefly had a Legal Attach# in Tel Aviv who, at one point, under instructions, began to report back to Washington without running his reports by the DCM. The DCM, who was charg# d'affaires at the time, wrestled with [the Legal Attach#] and “forced” the State Department to wrestle with the Justice Department, and he won. The Legal Attach# was required, when requested, to show his reporting to the charg#. That was the time when my already high opinion of Owen Zurhellen went way up. Zurhellen had absolutely nothing to gain from this and possibly a great deal to lose, but to him it was a matter of principle. It is the kind of principle the State Department has always tried to sweep under the rug when, in fact, if it is going to carry out its charter and responsibility as the “umbrella organization overseas,” it has got to fight for its rights. Pardon the digression.

The Surprise of the 1973 Middle East War

Q: No, no, I think that it's important. Tell me, how did the war of October 1973 impact on you? How did you see it?

SMITH: I did not expect it any more than anyone else did. During the 10 days leading up to the outbreak the military attach# went in, under instructions, with a warning [that war might be imminent]. The Israelis laughed. Then the [CIA] Chief of Station went in to talk

with his counterpart, under instructions, with a warning that we were afraid that [an Arab attack] might be coming. The Israelis laughed. The military attach# went back in again. Then, without instructions, I went in and talked with the head of the Arab Affairs Division of the Foreign Ministry and said, “I am afraid, not based on what my military colleagues are saying, but just from my reading of the tea leaves, that something very serious may be in the offing.”

Q: Where were you getting this? In the first place, was it intelligence?

SMITH: A few smart people in Washington began reading things right. I should not say 10 days—probably a week before the war broke out, because the Egyptian preparations for the war took longer than a week. In fact, [both Egyptians and Israelis] were engaged in major maneuvers near the demarcation line when—bang!—the war began. In retrospect it was a major intelligence failure, not only on the part of Israel—but also on the part of the United States—not to have been able to say, 72 hours ahead of time, that there was no question about what was going to happen.

Ambassador Keating and Nick Veliotes, the DCM, arrived on post just as I got back from home leave in August 1973. I remember accompanying Ambassador Keating down to the Suez Canal about three to four weeks after he arrived in September 1973, less than a month before war broke out. The Egyptians had, if I remember, 35,000 troops on their side. The Israelis had 900 troops on their side. The Israelis delighted in showing us how they could cover the whole Suez Canal line with 900 men. It turned out that they could not.

Q: The Bar Lev Line.

SMITH: That is right. The Bar Lev Line. It was a masterful piece of fortification, very carefully thought through, with all kinds of intricate electronic warning devices. But the Egyptians, to their credit, breached the line within the first 24 hours, I think. Then the Egyptians were so amazed at their success—and the same thing happened to the Syrians

on the Golan Heights—that they stood there in disbelief, when they should have been moving fast.

Q: OK, now, the attack starts. Was the Embassy [in Tel Aviv] ready for it?

SMITH: No, nobody was.

Q: So what were you all doing? Tell me what you thought about it.

SMITH: I was sitting at home, working on an Arab-Israeli peace plan of my own, when Nick Veliotes came by at about 2:00 PM on Saturday and said, “The balloon has gone up, and I can not believe it.” He said, “Walter, come with me, the balloon has gone up.” Off we went to the Embassy. We were there for about three days. We did not remember to bring any change of clothes, but we stayed for about three days, sleeping maybe two hours a night. Then he and I, and a couple of others, started taking turns, going home and getting a decent night's sleep. There was not anything we could do except report on what the Israelis were saying about the war. We did that quite methodically. Needless to say, the communications ear in Washington turned to the Middle East at that point. There were virtually no limits on our reporting in terms of quantity. We reported every single Israeli announcement and also reported on the mood in Israel, to the extent that we could plumb that. We were terribly worried for Israel's sake.

I remember the first night—the night the war broke out—Veliotes and I and some others were working almost all night long. We never thought of closing the blinds on our Embassy windows facing the Mediterranean Sea. That was the only night when Egyptian aircraft got close enough to Tel Aviv that they could actually see the city. They lobbed some missiles at Tel Aviv which missed. Had they struck Tel Aviv, it would have been so psychologically upsetting to the Israelis that I do not know what would have happened. Had they struck Tel Aviv, the fact that the American Embassy was lit up like a Christmas tree, without any

blinds drawn, might have contributed to their accuracy. From the next night on we had a little sense and we pulled down our blinds.

Q: Did you have any feeling, at that particular time, that if it really reached a certain point, the Israelis would go for nuclear weapons or did we believe that they had nuclear weapons then?

SMITH: Somebody may have known—but I did not know. I doubt that the Ambassador or the DCM knew whether the Israelis had nuclear weapons or not. There was no question that they could assemble a nuclear weapon on very short notice—and maybe they started doing that during that war [the 1973 war]. I do not know. I was not concerned.

Q: It can come almost by word of mouth, whether it's true or not. But was it accepted at the time—was it the accepted wisdom within the Embassy—that the Israelis had a nuclear capability that could be used?

SMITH: The folk wisdom within the Embassy at that time was that the Israelis were within one to four weeks of assembling a nuclear weapon, if they decided to go that way. They had the know-how and the technology, but [it was believed within the Embassy that] they had not done it. They did not have them [nuclear weapons] stored. I do not know whether that was true, but it was the folk wisdom within the Embassy at the time. That war lasted over three weeks, as I remember. They [the Israelis] may very well have assembled a bomb in the course of the war. It was not something which, during the first two or three days of the war, we thought could be just around the corner.

The 1973 War's Effect on Israel

Q: You say you were experiencing the mood of the place and you were at the Embassy all of that time...

SMITH: Toward the end of the war, we were not [always at the Embassy]. I had four or five political officers whom I could send out. Veliotes [the DCM] and I were at the Embassy all of the time, but the other reporting officers were fanned out, to the extent that they could locate their Israeli contacts—usually the wives of the contacts, as the contacts [themselves] were at the front.

It really is an impressive thing to see mobilization in Israel. It is no laughing matter. The postal service stops and the garbage collection stops because everybody is at the front—and I mean everybody. The street in front of our house in Herzliyya Pituach, the suburb north of Tel Aviv where virtually all of the married Embassy officers had their houses, was a troop collection point. My wife and our then teenage daughters ran a soup kitchen during those days to help feed these reservists who had been called up and were waiting and living on trucks, waiting to be told to go south or north. It was a very nerve-wracking time for them [the reservists], of course. My wife talked with them fairly extensively.

As I recall, it was three days before they finally got orders and were sent to the Sinai front. They got two-thirds of the way down there and then were sent north to the Golan Heights. They passed by again—that was how we knew this. They stopped for a couple of hours of rest and then proceeded north to the Golan Heights. So Israel was expecting a much bigger problem in the south than in the north. If you look at the map, the distance from the Golan Heights to Tel Aviv is [nearly] nothing. The distance to the Suez Canal is quite substantial. They had to forget about what they wanted to do in Sinai initially in order to plug the hole on the Golan Heights, because the Syrians really broke through. As we were saying a while ago, the Syrians simply stopped instead of pushing on. They could have pushed into Israel proper with no difficulty. This was at the end of the first day and a half or so. But they [the Syrians] did not do it.

Q: How about the Ambassador, Kenneth Keating? He was brand new. He had been an ambassador in India, but he was getting on in years.

SMITH: He was indeed getting on in years. He became very emotional, to the point where he was taking up a fair amount of Nick Veliotes' time, because he was getting downright irrational. He had been a colonel during World War II, and he was so moved by the situation that he said to Veliotes, I am sorry to say, in deathly earnest, that he was going to go and volunteer in the Israeli Army.

Q: [Laughter]. Can you imagine?

SMITH: Nick Veliotes practically had to put him under house arrest to keep him from doing or saying something irrational. He was a minus in this situation. May he rest in peace.

Q: It is interesting. Here is Israel, which is among the most important countries for the U.S. and also under threat of attack. Yet for a while Barbour was getting too old and was basically dying at the post, and then we sent an elderly New York politician...

SMITH: Pushing 80.

Q: Pushing 80.

SMITH: Not too smart.

Q: Not too smart. It was handy that we had somebody like Nick Veliotes, but, at the same time, people like [an unsuitable ambassador] can trip you up. Well, let's stop at this point and figure out what we want to talk about the next time. We'll put it on the tape right now. We want to end our discussion...

SMITH: We might have a few words about the disengagement agreements and Kissinger's style, because I was involved in all of that during the first six months of 1974. And then I came back and was involved in it in Washington.

Q: I'm thinking of sticking strictly to the time you were in Israel and also how the Embassy saw things at the very end of the 1973 war.

SMITH: That [involves] the disengagement agreements.

Q: Disengagement agreements. Okay. So we'll pick it up there.

October 1973: Shuttle Diplomacy Begins

Q: Today is June 25, 1993. Walter, can you figure out where you want to start now?

SMITH: You asked a good question, which I did not do justice to: what was the feeling of the Embassy at the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War [the Yom Kippur war]. I said that that is the same thing as discussing the disengagement agreements, which is what [Secretary of State] Kissinger was getting into. But, naturally, people who had spent, at that point, at least a year and, in several cases, two or three years in Israel, felt out of the big picture. I believe that those of us in the Embassy in Tel Aviv in late October 1973 had the same instincts that Middle East watchers had in 1967—for a different set of reasons, of course. That is, is there not some way to make this the Arab-Israeli War that ends all [such] wars?

We recognized the main theme of Kissinger's diplomacy toward the end of the war, which was to make sure that Israel, in effect, won the war and, at the same time, to leave a sense of honor with Israel's Arab adversaries, as the Arabs were forever putting it. So that they would not [appear to have] lost face and make sure, in other words, that Israel would not appear to have “trounced” them at the very end of the war as, indeed, Israel might have been able to do. The Arabs could thus summon the political courage finally to get into some serious negotiations with Israel. I must say, to Kissinger's full credit, he did end the war in a way which left the Israeli public dismayed and disgruntled, but not totally depressed. The depression which was palpable in Israel was not related so much to the way the war ended but to the fact that the war had broken out in the first place, despite all of the predictions on the part of every responsible Israeli that no such war was

conceivable. That war really took Israel by surprise. That alone is an interesting subject which we can not take the time to go into now.

There was, indeed, an enormous feeling, not so much of desperation, but depression in Israel. It was primarily focused on the fact that Israel had not ended the war with a resounding defeat of the enemy, which was therefore unfavorable from the point of view of negotiations. So that was the big picture: how can that [the outcome] be crafted into some kind of lasting settlement? And we all felt rather elated that the war ended the way it did, and Kissinger, who had had a very limited attitude toward the Arab-Israeli problem, had become an instant expert and was going to be Secretary of State for at least a year or two longer.

Q: Were you, as an Embassy officer, and others in the Embassy as well, taking any heat from "important" Israelis because they felt that we had stopped them from going to Damascus and Cairo?

SMITH: Not from "important" Israelis. There were demonstrations outside the American Embassy—rather nasty, potentially violent ones. There were a few windows broken. So there was anger at the United States. I do not think that it was focused on the alleged U.S. "responsibility" for stopping the Israeli forces before they could do a proper job. As I remember it, it had to do with a misunderstanding on the part of Israeli public opinion with respect to prisoners of war. Kissinger crafted an exchange of prisoners of war, knowing how important this was to Israeli public opinion. It was fair and reasonable. It was misrepresented, as I recall—and this gets a little hazy in my memory—in the Israeli press. Some Israeli young people believed a false story that the Americans had deliberately "delayed" the release of Israeli prisoners in order to gain some negotiating advantage. I think that was the only cause for violence against us in Tel Aviv at the end of the war.

Q: We're trying to keep this as much focused on the Embassy and you, particularly. The war ended. What were you all doing?

SMITH: Kissinger's first “shuttle” began before the war ended. It entailed zigzagging between Tel Aviv, Moscow, Damascus, and Cairo to pull off a cease-fire. This I remember well. He did not come to Tel Aviv. While in Cairo he sent Joe Sisco to Tel Aviv, which bothered some Israelis. It should not have, because, as Kissinger rightly put it in a confidential message to the Israelis, he knew that the Israelis knew him and could trust him, whereas the Arabs did not trust him at all. That was why he was “stroking” the Egyptians in particular, as well as the Syrians, and letting Joe Sisco talk to the Israelis. It was not an untenable proposition. You can not do everything simultaneously.

My admiration for Sisco, which was already high, went up still higher because the man a) understood what Kissinger wanted and got it done; and b) did not hesitate to “buck” Kissinger when he thought he was wrong. I just got a glimpse of this Sisco, who was with us only about 24 hours in Tel Aviv at that point.

Your question was, “What was the Embassy doing at that time?” It was supporting this kind of frenzied activity on the part of the Secretary of State or the Under Secretary of State, which was quite demanding. We did not have a big Political Section. We wound up by lassoing our colleagues from the Consular, Economic, and Administrative Sections to keep the place covered, because there had to be “round the clock” officer coverage by all possible means, on behalf of our visitors.

Let us see now. This was the end of October 1973. Kissinger was back by the end of November 1973 for a shuttle visit and for another shuttle visit in early December 1973. There was a lot of shuttling. I do not know how any other U.S. business got transacted in that period of time. In January 1974 he stayed almost a whole month in Egypt, if you will recall, to nail down the first disengagement agreement. The agreements between the end of the war at the end of October 1973 and the beginning of the negotiations leading to the first Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, reached in early January were several. The agreements had to do with troop disengagement and prisoner of war exchange. Both of these agreements were extremely important, especially the troop disengagement

agreement. You will recall that the map of the situation on the Egyptian front—and also on the Syrian front—was not to be believed. There were “pockets” of Egyptian and Israeli soldiers deep behind the other party's lines. How to straighten this out while assuring the two belligerents that they were not giving up anything of consequence and that a straightened line did not lose them any negotiating or military advantage—that was not a simple matter. On the other hand they could not possibly feed the troop pockets, especially the Egyptians.

Q: There was the whole [Egyptian] Third Army sitting out there...

SMITH: The [Egyptian] Third Army was an obvious sore thumb, but there were little bits and pieces of Egyptian units elsewhere, too, in extended and unsupportable locations. And there were Israeli [troops] in unsupportable locations behind the Egyptian lines. So that kept us busy.

The Geneva Middle East Peace “Conference”

I was summoned back to Washington by [Under Secretary of State] Joe Sisco on December 30, 1973, as was Bob Oakley, who was my counterpart as chief of the Political Section in Beirut. That was done because [Secretary of State] Kissinger, as you may recall, at the peace or non-peace conference in December 1973 (which the Syrians, at the last moment, refused to attend), created the illusion of an ongoing peace conference after he and the other principal [figures] left. I do not know whether he appreciated its value at the time, though he did very quickly after that, but this was a device to keep the Soviets somewhat distracted by implying an important [degree of] collaboration with the United States. It gave [the Soviets] a place of seeming prominence, namely, in Geneva. It was a way of keeping them out of his hair as he dealt with the parties concerned. To do this, he had to have somebody, some ostensible interim or acting chief of the U.S. Delegation in Geneva. That was why Oakley and I were summoned back to Washington on December 31, 1973, given our marching orders, and sent initially, with Mike Sterner, to Geneva to be

a “pretend” U.S. Delegation to the non-existent Middle East Peace Conference, at which the Soviets had their former ambassador to Egypt and Iran as our counterpart.

Sterner was by now a Deputy Assistant Secretary. So there was at least a smidgen of Soviet face-saving in having Sterner there. But Sterner only stayed for a week. I had a wonderful time with Sterner in Geneva. Sterner and I went to school together. Oakley had gone back to Beirut, and from that point, until the end of April 1974, Oakley and I took turns, leaving our posts in the Middle East to go and sit for two weeks [at a time in Geneva].

Q: Were you told that this is what you were doing or were you given something to do but not much?

SMITH: It was self-evident why we were doing what we were doing. And we were given absolutely nothing to do. We were told not to leave Geneva either. One weekend I did go down to Monaco to see an old friend who lives there. I did this with some apprehension, I might add, because even on the weekends we were supposed to be there, in Geneva, and visible to the Soviets and on call, for the Soviets or for Washington, whoever wanted to be in touch with us. The Israelis, at Kissinger's insistence, kept a delegation there, too. I happened to know the Israeli delegates. They were Foreign Ministry people who were as frustrated as I was at this fiction. That is what I was doing [during the period] from January to April 1974. In fact, my two sons were scheduled to be confirmed at St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem in April 1974. Because, as often happened, I had no travel orders, I finally telephoned Roy Atherton from Geneva and said, “Please see if I can't go back to Israel for this coming weekend, to be present at my sons' confirmation.” And Roy arranged it.

Q: How about the Soviet delegation that was there [in Geneva]? What were you doing [with them]?

SMITH: The Soviets were sore with their delegation head Vinogradov, who had botched things recently as Ambassador to Egypt. They were using [this occasion to “punish” him]. They were not stupid. They figured out what Kissinger was up to and were very frustrated. I think that Kissinger met with his Soviet counterpart at some point, somewhere in Western Europe, to “stroke him” and pick his brains, so that the Soviets could continue the masquerade of major power collaboration for their own people. I do not know how we figured out that the Soviets wanted to “punish” their ambassador, but there was no question that this was the case.

Q: Well, if you have to be “punished,” Geneva was not the worst place in the world to go. It could have been Khartoum [Sudan] or some place like that.

SMITH: That is true. We would go and call on this Soviet ambassador every third day or so, just so that he would know [that we were there]. We had nothing to say. We had to “invent” things to say to him. In fact, he was a likable man.

That takes us up to the spring of 1974, and then, of course, Kissinger began his Syrian shuttle—about the time we wound down this silly exercise. Actually, after I left Geneva, Bob Oakley had to continue to hang around there for several more weeks. As I remember it, this began in April or May, 1974.

Nixon's and Meir's Final Days in Office

Q: Now we're in the spring of 1974. Then you went back to...

SMITH: [President] Nixon, of course, was on his last legs. We had Nixon's grand visit...

Q: This was sort of Nixon's grand tour that he was undertaking to get away from the Watergate Affair.

SMITH: That is right. To emphasize his strong point of foreign affairs, [President Nixon] made a very high profile visit to several of the major Middle Eastern capitals. I think [he visited] Egypt, Israel, Syria, Jordan, and...

Q: Were you in Israel when he came through?

SMITH: Of course.

Q: How did [the visit] go? Because it was my understanding that everyone knew that this was a dying, a failing presidency. Did it come across that way where you were—or how [did it look]?

SMITH: In fairness to Nixon, he comes off very well when overseas. I had seen him in action when I was his escort officer in the Soviet Union in 1967 for two or three weeks. He has a lot of dignity and wit about him in a foreign situation. He thrives on that, too. He held his head up high, at least when he was in Israel. I am sure it was much more of a dilemma for the Israelis than for the Arabs because, when push comes to shove, Israel depends very much on its “special relations” with the White House—not with Congress and obviously not with the State Department. So the Israelis were hoping against hope that Nixon, who had proved himself, on the whole, to be a good friend to them would survive. They did not want to see an interim president. So the Israelis were nervous about the Watergate business. The [Nixon] visit came off very well in Israel. Nixon said the right things, he paid the proper courtesy calls, he did not have an impulse to do anything zany. We got him in and out of there. He got enormous, positive coverage in the Israeli media, as I am sure he did in the Arab media, too. It was the first time a president of the United States had visited any of those countries.

The ability of Israel to absorb the enormity of its miscalculation in the outbreak of the [1973] war in the first place really occupied us in terms of our reporting on the Israeli domestic scene. In addition to that, there was a crisis within the Israeli government. As

you may recall, Golda Meir was interim prime minister for about five months. Finally, Rabin became prime minister when she stepped down. She had already resigned but she was required, under the Israeli constitution, to stay in office until a certain point. And then Rabin became Prime Minister in the spring of 1974.

This was a unique situation. It had never happened before that Israel had a caretaker Prime Minister who had the courage, bless her, to sign the agreements on the cease-fire, the prisoner of war [exchanges], the straightening out of the line [of contact between the Israeli and the Egyptian armies], and the disengagement with Egypt. I think she was still in office at the time the agreement on the disengagement with Syria was negotiated. I think she was already a caretaker Prime Minister at the end of the war. She signed these agreements. That was because of the tremendous moral authority that Golda Meir had in Israel. Since then, Israel has had caretaker prime ministers who have been scared of their shadows, because they really did not have the constitutional authority to do that kind of thing. So we got away with murder in terms of the Israeli domestic political situation at that time, thank goodness.

Anonymous Backstopping of Kissinger in Washington

So back I came from Israel, at the end of July, 1974. I was sitting at my desk in Tel Aviv one day, and exactly one day later, I was sitting at my desk in the State Department as Director of Israeli and Arab-Israeli Affairs.

Q: You served from when to when...

SMITH: From July 1974, until July 1978, a very interesting period. Kissinger was there—let me get this right—for the first two of those years. Then [I served under] Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Yes, Kissinger stayed on, did he not, as Secretary of State under President Gerald Ford?

Q: Yes.

SMITH: I cannot recall whether it was because Kissinger or Sisco asked for it, but those of us at the working level knew that it was the logical thing: I threw myself with a frenzy into writing a series of papers in July, August, and September 1974, explaining how he should try to pull off a so-called disengagement between Israel and Jordan, even though there had been no combat between Israel and Jordan. Kissinger instantly recognized the desirability, if we could manage it, of persuading the Israelis to pull back from a token portion of the West Bank. [If this were done] we would strengthen the hand of the Jordanians as possible spokesmen for the Palestinians. If we did not do this, in rapid fire order in the summer of 1974, then [Yasser] Arafat and the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] would be institutionalized [as the representatives of the Palestinians], which is precisely what did happen, I think it was in November 1974, at the Arab League Summit meeting. After this King Hussein [of Jordan] just washed his hands and said, [in effect], “I can no longer negotiate an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank on behalf of the Palestinians. I have been rejected.” This greatly complicated the political life of the United States in the area.

Through Joe Sisco, I did get a backhanded compliment from Henry Kissinger. I guess it was just before the Nixon resignation. [In effect Kissinger reportedly said that] all of this makes eminent sense, but the White House is so weak and is going to be so weak for such a protracted period of time that he [Kissinger] could not pull this off from a U.S. domestic political standpoint. He sent that word to me, which was the closest thing I ever got to a compliment from him. Kissinger also said, “For once the State Department people are writing a paper that takes all aspects of the problem into account.” I had looked at Kissinger's own writing and now saw papers relating to the disengagement efforts up until then, the summer of 1974, and recognized that Kissinger did not want a simple analysis of what the smartest thing would be to say to the Israelis and, in this case, King Hussein and what the carrots and sticks for the parties should be. He wanted to know what would be happening in Algeria, what would be the ability of the Algerians to undercut King Hussein, what would be happening in Western Europe, what would the Soviets be up to—you know,

the global [perspective]. It was not that hard to do. It was not our style in the Department at the time [to do this kind of thing].

Q: Tell me, just to give me a feel [for the situation]. Here you are, as the Arab-Israeli desk officer, and you're thinking of what would the Soviets do, what would the French do, what would the Algerians do—you're treading on all sorts of toes. How do you handle this? Do you call up and ask? This is sort of a nuts and bolts question. How would you go about it?

SMITH: I do not remember whether I ever cleared the various sections of my action memorandum to Kissinger with the desks concerned. If it had not been urgent, obviously, I would have done so, as I should have. I am not sure if I did. It was not a profound study. I simply put myself in—who was it?—Boumedienne's position [as President of Algeria]. I was vaguely aware of what the Algerians had been [accustomed to] saying about King Hussein and I had paid close attention to what they had done and said about the Arab-Israeli problem since the [1973] war had ended. We had been talking with the leaders of the entire region, and so I kept track of them in the EXDIS telegrams. Simply on the basis of the existing short record, I extrapolated what they would probably do in this case and came up with suggestions which may have been faulty but looked obvious to me of things that we could do or at least say to the Algerians to keep them quiet—little hints of future U.S. favors in other contexts. I am sure I did not clear this with the Algerian desk officer because he would have wanted to make a Ph.D. thesis out of it, and there was not time. Also, it was sketchy. It was not a prediction to Kissinger of what would happen. It was a scenario suggesting that this was what might happen, and this was a possible way to contain these actors on the margins who could disrupt what you wanted to do otherwise.

Q: What you're really talking about is the [widespread] complaint that the State Department can't produce [such studies] because, even if you wanted a thumb-nail sketch of what Algeria and the Soviet Union [would do], by the time you get it [cleared] you get a tome...

SMITH: Or if you do not get a tome, you get a wishy-washy [study]...

Q: This is how the NSC [National Security Council] operates. You make your best shot, which usually isn't too bad.

SMITH: It is better to have [such a paper] done in effective, real time than to belabor the points. But you can make major errors. The point of this paper was that it was not a rigid scenario, under which Kissinger was going to move, step by step. It was simply a picture. Kissinger would fill in the picture as he went along. He was going to "ad hoc" it from day to day, anyhow. But it [the memorandum] was to jog his memory on the fact that, if Kissinger made a public statement about this or that aspect of King Hussein's role in relation to Jerusalem or the West Bank, it would—I am just making this up—irritate the hell out of Boumedienne, who had a propaganda machine in the Arab world to make life horribly difficult for King Hussein. So [the idea was] that you do not go public with this or that viewpoint, if you want to avoid riling the waters. This is the kind of thing that we are talking about here.

Helping Coordinate Middle East Peace Efforts; the Pro-Israel Lobby

Q: You know, the Arab-Israeli desk officer...

SMITH: Let me interrupt. That is a pre-1967 term. What it really meant was that [I was] the Israel and Palestinian desk officer. The "Arab" part dealt only with East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

Q: Now, were you doing the normal things that a desk officer does, such as taking care of visitors and all of that? Because I imagine...

SMITH: That was not the purpose of this desk at all. It was the desk for Palestinians. It sounds as if it was a regional office operation. But the Israeli desk—the Israel and Arab-Israeli desk—can not speak for any Arabs except for those then under Israeli occupation and inside Israel before 1967. [In fact], not under Israeli occupation but under Jordanian

and Egyptian occupation, but still intimately associated with the Israel problem, let us say. Namely, the Palestinians.

Q: Well, you must have been inundated with visitors and all that, which must have taken an awful lot of your time. Could you turn them aside, particularly Congressional visitors and all that?

SMITH: Yes, but most prominent Americans considered themselves instant experts before they even left, so they were not screaming for State Department briefings. They knew it all, already. Furthermore, the Israeli Embassy [in Washington] was happily giving them all kinds of briefings, and we would like to have given [these visitors] what we considered the "straight" story, but, as you have sensed, we could not stretch ourselves in that many directions at once. A great deal of the Arab-Israeli stuff, regionally speaking, did, indeed, fall in our laps. Somebody had to do it. NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] did not have regional offices any longer. Those had been scrapped when the country directorate system was created. There was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State [DAS] for South Asia, another DAS for North Africa, and another DAS for the main part of the Middle East. So we at least had a person with authority to deal with these matters, and, starting a year later, it was Nick Veliotes who came back from Tel Aviv, where he had been DCM, and took over this work.

Even though there was a deputy assistant secretary for the pieces of the NEA region, because there was no office dealing with those pieces, some country directorate within the Middle East would have to function, in effect, as a [regional] office, as far as getting the papers together was concerned, making sure that people all wrote their bits and pieces, and it all got assembled. That fell to us. So we did have, in the 1974-76 period, quite a bit of regional paperwork to do, if you will. We were stretched, then. Thank goodness, prominent Americans wanting to go to Israel were not pounding at our door.

Q: What about the Israeli lobby? Are we talking about this time and its effect on you—AIPAC [American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee] and you and the various issues?

SMITH: I knew it well from back in December 1970, when the Israeli lobby went berserk after [Secretary of State] Rogers' Peace Plan Section II, which dealt with the West Bank and Jerusalem, came out. [The lobby] flooded the Executive Branch [of the U.S. Government] with so much correspondence that normal operations came to a halt. So I was familiar with all of this. There was a fair amount of confusion in the [Israeli] lobby. There was no clear signal from Israel to the lobby in 1974-75, and many prominent American supporters of Israel recognized that Kissinger, even though he was having a lot of friction with Israel, was displaying a lot of good sense in maneuvering in the Middle East. No matter how little confidence the pro-Israeli lobby, like the Israeli Government, had in Kissinger at the beginning of 1974, within four months he had pulled off disengagement agreements with the two combatants, Egypt and Syria. The Syrian disengagement [agreement], if you look at it carefully, was really extremely difficult and a tour de force for which alone Kissinger deserved the Nobel Peace Prize.

Naturally, the American-Israeli lobby thought that we had a Secretary of State who was not pounding on Israel and was displaying a lot of wisdom in what he was doing—and was a real activist. Kissinger barely had time for anything else in 1974-75. Things slowed down a little bit in 1975 after the second Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, which was reached, if I remember correctly, in September, 1975. The purpose of this agreement was to nail the Israelis down. To do this, Kissinger made some very unfortunate commitments to the Israelis, which plagued us later on, about what the U.S. would or would not do in the future in pursuing Middle East peace efforts. He did not have to do that. I do not know what made him think that he did. But that is getting a little bit ahead of the story.

I do not know what else to say on this. The Israeli lobby was not a problem in 1974 or in 1975—at least not more than it always is for anybody in the State Department trying to carry out U.S. Middle East policy. They were checking on us. I spent a lot of time, as

Director of Israeli Affairs, with major supporters of Israel. I went to a lot of receptions, almost to a point above and beyond the call of duty, to let them see me, talk to me, show them that this is the guy who, at the working level, is responsible for Israel in the State Department. Was this guy an Arab lover? Was he a Jew hater? They could see that I was not. I think this did some good. Now that I think about it, I spent an inordinate amount of time, not exactly stroking these people but just exposing myself to them. I honestly think that this did some good. I got my staff—the FSOs [Foreign Service Officers] working with me on that desk—to do the same thing. Then, as things calmed down, in 1976-77, the NEA Office of Public Affairs "discovered" me and put me into their speaking meat grinder. I spent about 25 percent of my time traveling around the United States, talking about United States Middle Eastern policy—as often as not in front of American Jewish groups of all stripes. And, of course, academic and business groups and so forth. That was quite exhausting, as I look back on it.

Q: The various Jewish groups throughout the United States have been such a major factor in our Middle Eastern policy, because they are so politically powerful. Did you find yourself up against "true believers" or did the people asking you questions have what I would call a "rational approach" to the role of Israel at that particular time in the Middle East?

SMITH: On the whole, I was impressed with the degree of sophistication of Israel's supporters in the American hinterland. I should not have been surprised, because these people were: a) well educated, whether it was Des Moines [Iowa] or Little Rock [Arkansas] or wherever I was. They were always interested in international affairs, partly because of their attachment to Israel but, I suspect, not only because of Israel. They were quite knowledgeable about American foreign affairs. Also, they were very grateful to have somebody come from the State Department and try to explain to them what the State Department and the Secretary of State were seeking to do. The fact that we had a dynamo for a Secretary of State, who was, by now, a proven friend of Israel and also a very smart character in handling Israel and the Arabs—and who happened to be Jewish—this was not lost on these people that I was dealing with. I sometimes found myself dealing with blue

collar, relatively ignorant, American Jewish groups, who tended to be extremists in their belief or their willingness to believe the cliches about how the State Department was the enemy of Israel. But that did not happen often. On the whole, I found the American Jewish community to be intelligent, perceptive, well informed, and willing to listen to somebody from the State Department.

It was a reassuring experience. The fact that I had just lived three years in Israel, spoke a little Hebrew, and was not a “buddy” of the Arabs by any stretch of the imagination did not hurt, naturally.

President Carter and the Middle East

Q: How did you find the change when the Carter administration came in? Let's talk about the transition and that period. Here you were—there was a new administration coming in, with Democrats coming in to replace Republicans. This was a major issue. How were you treated or perceived by the new people coming in and how did you deal with the transition period?

SMITH: Every new administration brings in a bunch of political figures who think that they know it all and push aside the career people. I know what you mean. As far as the Jewish community is concerned, though, it is worth mentioning that Nixon and Ford had been so weak that they were pleased to have a properly elected president. Until Nixon the Democrats had seemed to be friendlier to Israel than the Republicans. Nixon turned that idea on its head in the view of the American Jewish community.

This is an aside, but even though Nixon seems to be on record as having made some extraordinarily anti-Semitic remarks, he nevertheless will go down in the history of the American Jewish community as one of the most pro-Israeli presidents that we have ever had. That is really what is called “squaring the circle.”

Q: Well, he was a politician.

SMITH: But back to President Carter. The American Jewish community and the State of Israel had no reason to think that Carter was not going to be a true friend of Israel. But what made them nervous was the fact that—I do not know whether it was [Zbigniew] Brzezinski or [Secretary of State] Vance or [President] Carter himself who set something of a deadline to get back to a major effort toward a total settlement in the Middle East, as opposed to these "piecemeal" arrangements which Kissinger had concentrated on. I think that it was Vance who did this, and he lived to rue the day, because he could not meet his own schedule. So there was a great burst of Middle East consultations, travel by Vance to Moscow, Western Europe, and to the Middle East, because he set a deadline for reconvening the Middle East Peace Conference. I have got all of this written down at home, because I wrote a paper on U.S. Middle Eastern peace efforts from 1967 to 1982, which is about 250 pages long and which has never been published.

Vance made some gaffes early on which made him look much less sympathetic to Israel than the facts justified. He made some statements on the eve of visiting Arab capitals which made the Israelis nervous. But I do not think that the Israelis were really worried about the Carter administration at all until the Camp David negotiations.

Camp David was a bewildering event. The Camp David meetings took place just after I had left the position of Director of Israeli and Arab-Israeli Affairs—in fact, two months later. To me it was spellbinding. Some very good books have been written about it.

Q: Did you have any problems with the transition? I'm talking about the teams that came in to look at things, or was that a fairly professional transition, at least in the NEA area where you were working?

SMITH: I do not recall any upheaval in NEA or with respect to the Middle East, resulting from the change of administration, other than the rhetoric of the incoming administration, spurning any further effort on partial arrangements and calling for a major effort to go right to the fundamentals of the Middle East peace problem. This looked very optimistic to us at

the time, although Carter had the will power, and Camp David was the result. No, I do not remember a transition problem.

Q: Is there anything that you can add?

SMITH: Vance, in my view, was one of the best Secretaries of State that we ever had. He certainly went out of his way to consult the professionals [in the State Department]. He was not abrasive with the career staff of the Department of State. On the contrary, he relied heavily on career officers. So there was a good working atmosphere within the Department after Vance took over.

Q: Is there anything else that we should cover before we move on to your next assignment, because we want to stick to your experiences, rather than...

SMITH: My last year or year and a half—1977-78—in this position which we have been talking about entailed more and more time spent on the road in public speaking. This was partly because the Department needed me to do that and partly because my office was not directly involved in those preliminary stages of groping with the Middle East problem. Therefore, this was a good way to use me and my time. I did not have a problem with this, other than the fact that it was exhausting. To make a long story short, I do not think that there is anything else that I was directly involved in during the 1977-78 time period which we need to go into.

Q: Just another, quick question. What was your impression, during the 1974-78 period, of the reporting from the Middle East? Because now you were in a different position. You were looking at the reporting coming from Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv. Did you have any feel, at that particular time, [about the quality of] the information that was coming from our posts in the Middle East?

SMITH: I recall that the reporting on the domestic political situation seemed to me to be very good, even from capitals such as Damascus, where we had very little access.

I thought that it was impressive. On the Arab-Israeli problem, it was of limited value, as long as Kissinger was Secretary of State, because he was conducting it all “out of his hat.” There was no way for a reporting officer in the field to have any true sense of what was likely to happen next in Washington. Because Washington was the major player, not the local folks. But on the domestic political scene, I thought that our reporting was darned good.

Q: Then where did you go? You left when?

SMITH: In July, 1978—I went to the Senior Seminar at the FSI [Foreign Service Institute].

Q: And after a year of that...

SMITH: I went to East Berlin as the DCM.

SENIOR YEARS: An Occasional Chance to Alter Things (1979-1987)U.S. Policy Toward Eastern Europe

Q: Who was the Ambassador and what was the situation?

SMITH: David Bohlen was my Ambassador during the first year. Herbert Okun was my Ambassador for the next two and one-half years, and Roz [Rozanne] Ridgway was my Ambassador during my last half year there. I was there for four years.

Q: We're talking about 1978-82.

SMITH: Actually, 1979-83.

Q: Could you give us a feel for the political situation in East Germany at that time?

SMITH: When I arrived, Ambassador Bohlen had made some headway in trying to interest both the Executive Branch [of the U.S. Government] and American private business groups in expanding U.S. economic relations with the East Germans. For this he deserves

some credit, because there had been a tendency for our government to advise American businessmen on transactions with East Germany more or less along the lines that the West Germans wanted. This enraged Ambassador Bohlen, who thought that we had our own economic interests in East Germany. Obviously, on the political front we would follow the West German lead, but there was no reason in the world to forego commercial opportunities in East Germany, only to see some West German firm come along and do the same thing six months later. He saw that happen over and over again and he fought against it. He was making considerable progress in moving the Executive Branch to favor a liberalization of our trade restrictions—a very limited liberalization—vis-a-vis East Germany.

As you may recall, our trade restrictions in Eastern Europe varied enormously during that period. The Poles were “good guys,” the Romanians were “moderately good guys,” the Hungarians came next, and then everybody else was a “bad guy.” This so-called [standard] by which we rewarded or punished the satellites, depending on their willingness to act independently of Moscow, sounded very good but did not work very well in practice. This whole strategy of trying to expand U.S. trade relations with East Germany came crashing down when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan...

Q: This was Christmas, 1979.

SMITH: That is right. And the U.S. Government put relations, not only with the Soviet Union but with all of the so-called satellites, on “hold.” Again, some differentiation was at play, because we studied, we scrutinized what the various Eastern European governments said about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the two or three weeks after it took place. Of course, the East Germans instinctively praised the Soviets. They had learned how to do this all along. That is an interesting subject unto itself. The East Germans, as I learned while I was there, were the pariahs of the Warsaw Pact. The Soviets hated them, and the other Eastern Europeans were scared to death of them and despised them. So they had very little “wiggle space.” One of the ways by which they tried to ingratiate

themselves with the Soviets, to gain “wiggle space,” was to praise whatever the Soviets did in the international field. So East Germany came right out in full support of the invasion of Afghanistan, and “boom”—that was the end of any possible effort to improve trade relations.

Q: What was our analysis at the time? You were looking at the East Germans within the Eastern Bloc. Why were they so..

SMITH: They were Germans. World War II was a bitter memory for the leadership of all of the Eastern European countries. These guys [the East Germans] may have been “their” Germans, but they were still Germans. The hatred between the Slavs and the Germans is enough to make one's head spin. We in the West do not know what hatred means, in a European context.

Q: Well, were they also considered, by any chance, to be the Soviets' “enforcers?” I'm thinking of, what was it, 1968 or 1969, the [time of the invasion of] Czechoslovakia.

SMITH: The Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Hungarians did, too.

Q: But were the [East] Germans seen as a kind of “stalking horse” or “bully boy” that the Soviets could use? Was there something in this or not?

SMITH: I do not think so. I think that the Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians knew that the Russians did not like the Germans any more than they did. Indeed, the Soviets would have been very hesitant to use East Germany as an instrument of Soviet policy, within the context of the Warsaw Pact. Because the Soviets themselves knew how strong the hatred of the Germans was. The fact that the East Germans had the extent of maneuverability and, in fact, influence within the Warsaw Pact that they did is a tribute to their own political finesse. It was a rough life to be East Germany within the Soviet-dominated community.

Ambassadorial Perceptions; the DCM as Peacekeeper

Q: How did you find it? First of all, let's talk about you and the office. How were you used by the three Ambassadors you served under—Bohlen, Okun, and Ridgway?

SMITH: Regarding Ambassador Bohlen, I do not know whether enough time has passed to tell you about the problems that David Bohlen had with the Embassy in East Berlin.

Q: Why don't we talk about it, because these things [are usually not really understood] for a long time.

SMITH: Well, I do not think that the man has died yet. When I got there, he and my predecessor were not on speaking terms. My predecessor, Sol Polansky, was a well-known and beloved Foreign Service officer, a long-time East European specialist. Bohlen did not know about Eastern Europe or the communist world.

Q: What was his background?

SMITH: David Bohlen, a commercial officer, entered the Foreign Service in about 1948, at which time there were, perhaps, two or three African-American Foreign Service officers. He was told, when he entered the Service—he loved to tell the story, and I have no reason to doubt it—that at that time, 1948, there was only one posting he could have, Liberia. He endured a lot of difficulty—let us put it that way—as an African-American Foreign Service officer. He came out of it doing very well. But this bitter and difficult experience had its impact on him. By the time I got to East Berlin in 1979, I am sorry to say, David Bohlen had become paranoid. Or so it seemed. There was only one other black on the American staff, a communicator. I had the impression that Bohlen quite literally concluded that every single member of the Embassy staff, except this young black woman on the communications staff, was his enemy and was out to make him look bad, to trip him up, and to disobey him.

He gave me the benefit of the doubt. I had simply made known my interest in posts that were open. Sol Polansky, my predecessor, was devoid of racial prejudice.

Q: Low key.

SMITH: A savvy, warm person. I do not mind telling you that the fact that Ambassador Bohlen apparently decided that Polansky was not on his side is a sign of how mixed up Bohlen's thinking and feelings seem to have been when I got there. He decided that I was going to be his salvation. I had been away from East European affairs for a number of years. I was not a “creature” of the Office of German Affairs—and here Bohlen's complaint had some justification. Bohlen felt that the Department had allowed the “pro-Bonn forces” in the Foreign Service, in effect, to sit on our relationship with East Germany, instead of allowing it to go its natural way, i.e., toward the expansion of commercial relations. Bohlen's background was strictly economic and commercial affairs. I began to see things Bohlen's way, that, in effect, the West German desk in Washington was telling the Embassy in East Berlin exactly how to run its affairs. Furthermore, our West German desk in Washington was letting the West Germans tell them what to tell us. It was ridiculous.

Ambassador Bohlen decided, because I was not out of the West German Affairs mold and had been away from East European and communist affairs for nine years while I worked on the Middle East, that I was going to be a “safe” bet for him, and it was like a drowning man looking for a life raft. He decided that he liked me. He came to call on me in the fall of 1978 at my home here in Washington—he and his wife. My wife and I put on the best show we could for them. We did not have any help. We lived in a tiny house in the South East section of Washington, D. C., but we made a good impression on the Bohlens. I had plenty of competition [for the job], but he chose me to be his new DCM. After I got to East Berlin, I worked hard for him. I am reasonably satisfied that Bohlen did not consider me “the enemy” at any time, from his personal African-American point of view. This was one of the most interesting and sensitive assignments I ever had.

Q: Well, you were the DCM. This job involves not just your relationship with the ambassador. You're the general manager of the staff, including all the other officers. How did you handle that?

SMITH: I think it was not true that the staff was trying to trip him up. The staff just did their job. I was there as an intermediary, which Polansky was not able to be during the last months he was there. In my view, Ambassador Bohlen was foolish in revealing to the rest of the staff how worried he was about them as white men. My arrival more or less neutralized this horrendous, emotional problem which the ambassador seemed to be having. Fortunately, Bohlen trusted me sufficiently that he would seek my views before he would send a policy recommendation to Washington. I was able to help him avoid going too far in one direction or another—not that he did not write well or that he did not make sense, but he was, indeed, new to this area.

Q: How did he act in dealing with East German officials?

SMITH: Correctly. His German was hard to understand for them. His German was not “fluent” and had mistakes. Because he spoke English with an African-American accent, he also had trouble speaking German clearly. I have found, in my experience, that the extent to which an individual speaks his or her native language with a regional accent tends to limit his ability, somehow, to learn foreign languages without getting the accent wrong. There are exceptions, but generally speaking, this is true. I found that was part of Ambassador Bohlen's problem.

The East German authorities were smart enough to know that here was Ambassador Bohlen, who had arrived at the post without the usual preconceptions, let us say, concerning U.S.-Soviet relations and, above all, U.S.-West German relations, and was willing to try, within reason, to improve U.S.-East German economic relations. This is exactly what the East Germans needed, and so they appreciated what Bohlen was trying to do. He had as cordial relations with the East German authorities as any American

ambassador could have. This is not saying a great deal, considering the Cold War divide. Ambassador Bohlen left East Berlin ten months after I got there, and I was charg# d'affaires for about four months between his departure and the arrival of Ambassador Herb Okun.

The West German-U.S.-East German Triangle

Q: How was Herb Okun as an ambassador?

SMITH: Herb Okun is a maestro with relatively few personal hang-ups. He is quite open about them. Okun, of course, has an ego that would barely fit in this room, but he is an extraordinarily sensitive, smart man. And he has a sense of humor. Sometimes he could have afforded to have more of a sense of humor, but after Ambassador Bohlen, Ambassador Okun was a joy, because he was a real “pro.” He was, first and foremost, a political officer, and that is what you needed in East Berlin. Secondly, he was a Soviet expert, which is what you needed in East Berlin. And thirdly, he was not going to sit back and take instructions from Washington if he could help it—instructions which, in effect, had been written in Bonn—any more than Bohlen was. Okun was infinitely more sophisticated in how to deal with this problem.

Herb Okun is an extraordinary individual, as you know. He did a very good job in East Berlin.

Q: I take it that as we talked about relationships between the posts in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv...

SMITH: East Berlin and Bonn [laughter].

Q: Can you tell me how you saw this? You arrived new on the scene, and all of a sudden, wham!—there you were. How would you describe the political atmosphere of the American

Embassy in East Germany and the American Embassy in Bonn and the relations between these two. I think that they were not quite friendly powers.

SMITH: They really were not. As I said before, there was not much room for maneuver for those serving in East Berlin. They were certainly not friendly to the East German regime but did not see why U.S. policy toward East Germany should be written by the West Germans. Particularly when the West Germans would ask us not to do something, politically or economically, and then would turn around and do it themselves. That was the ultimate, aggravating part of it. All of this became almost hypothetical once the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. The East German regime, as I said before, came out with blatant praise for the Soviet action, and that meant the end of any possible improvement in U.S.-East German relations right there. That happened in January 1980.

The Polish Solidarity Crisis: Moscow's Nonintervention

The next thing that happened, which made serving in East Berlin extremely interesting all over again, but for a totally different reason, was the boiling up of the Solidarity crisis in the summer of 1980 in Poland. I do not think I am betraying U.S. security interests in saying this, but we received one alert after another between August and December 1980, instructing us to keep a substantive officer up all night because, within 24 hours, there was a good possibility that the Soviets were going to intervene militarily in Poland. We had every officer in the Embassy—at least every junior officer—constantly driving around [East Germany]. We did not have any military attach#s in East Berlin. So consular and administrative officers—everybody—was busy driving along the East German-Polish border, looking for military concentrations. It was a very heady exciting time.

The reason that this made serving in East Germany interesting was that—and I think with fairly good reason—the U.S. intelligence community began to look upon East German statements and activities in relation to this bubbling crisis in Poland as something of a litmus test as to what the Soviets might do. Now I have no doubt whatever in my mind

that [Erich] Honecker [East German president] was urging the Soviets to intervene in Poland. Honecker was not wrong. The Solidarity crisis [ostensibly] calmed down when [General] Jaruzelski became, in effect, the military dictator of Poland. However, in fact it never really did calm down. It was the beginning of the end of the whole Soviet system. So Honecker was “right” in his advice to Moscow. But the Soviets, for other reasons, decided to hold their fire. Remember, in 1956 they had intervened in Hungary and in 1968, in Czechoslovakia. They had less reason for doing this than the situation in Poland was giving them in 1980-81. The difference was that the Soviets began to see the handwriting on the wall and figured that the day was over when they could intervene and get away with it.

Q: They [the Soviets] also didn't have really strong leadership at the time.

SMITH: That is right. Brezhnev was dying in place.

Q: And there were two other Soviet leaders, Andropov and Chernenko, who died within a year of each other.

SMITH: That is right. That was a bit later, but, furthermore, the Soviet armed forces were tied down in Afghanistan and were way over committed there. There were various reasons why the Soviets figured that they were not going to mess things up. It appears that the main reason was that the Poles had rather large armed forces, unlike the armed forces of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. That is the first point. The second point is that the Russians knew, historically, that the Poles are utter daredevils who would not hesitate to resist with force any Soviet incursion into Poland. That is why they [the Soviets] did not intervene in Poland in 1956, when they thought about it, because the Poles had perhaps 400,000 men on the ground and would not hesitate—in fact would consider it “glorious”—to give up their lives shooting Russians, which the Czechs and Hungarians were smart enough not to do. So the unpredictability of the Poles, the depth of their hatred for the Russians, and their

adventurous—almost comically bravado-type attitude toward war—and the large size of their armed forces—were all considerations.

Dissent, Defection, Provocation, and False Statistics in East Germany

Q: Sitting right on their [the Soviets] lines of communications. Well, how did you find dealing with the East Germans? Were you ever able to sit down and talk with some of the officials at your level—were they real "apparatchiks" or creatures of the government?

SMITH: The officials were creatures of the government. But I arrived in East Berlin believing that the GDR [German Democratic Republic] was a monolith. I am embarrassed to tell you this, although I had plenty of company among people who had been tracking the situation in that part of the world up to that point. I believed that the regime, which was indeed one of the most sophisticated police states of all time, had all forms of dissent under control, and there was no way that I was going to have a meaningful relationship with East Germans. This was not true at all. East Germany was seething with discontent and dissent, and Honecker, who was a very competent politician, knew better than to try to stifle it. The reason why all of us, looking at the GDR from afar, thought that the East Germans had achieved police state homogeneity par excellence was that they were Germans, that Germans believe in order, and that Germans strive for proper appearances. And this enormous amount of dissent and discontent never was reported in the press—at least very rarely.

To prevent the situation from blowing up in his face, Honecker allowed—and made a conscious decision to allow—a fair amount of dissent to go on. He allowed Western diplomats to meet with physicians, artists, and movie producers. We knew all kinds of East Germans who criticized the regime at length, away from the microphones in my residence. They had analyzed why the regime was doing this or that and whether it was dumb or stupid or smart. They were totally open in their pro-Western feelings. It was a heady, exciting time, compared to my tour of duty in Poland, let alone my tour of

duty in the Soviet Union. Also, the fact that I was a senior officer must have helped. I was able to have remarkably open relationships with members of a wide spectrum of East German society. If I ever entertained anybody from the Foreign Ministry, the guy would toe the [government] line right down to the last word and was an “apparatchik.” No question about it. I knew many people from many walks of life. The private sector [in East Germany]—again, something that Honecker had encouraged—had grown by the time I got there. Something like one out of five or six shops was privately owned. Taxes for private entrepreneurs had been reduced. Some of the best doctors in East Germany were in private practice. So the East German situation presented a mixed picture.

I repeat that the reason why I was convinced that it was not going to be like that was because of certain characteristics of the German personality, as seen from afar.

Q: You must have been very aware of the fact that the East Germans provided a kind of training ground for repressive police regimes all over the world—still in power in Libya and some other places. Did you feel that you were being set up or that—what are they called, “honey traps?” [i.e., sexual entrapments]—were being used, and not just against you? Were there other provocations, or were we beyond that point?

SMITH: No, there were the usual provocations. The provocations which were the most worrisome were highly sophisticated efforts on the part of “Stasi” [Secret Police] operatives to engage one or another Embassy officer by sending a very convincing defector into the Embassy. This happened about every three months. One happened just after Ambassador Okun arrived, and it was a tough one for him to decide. Okun made the decision to violate a long-standing, fundamental rule for American embassies behind the Iron Curtain. He allowed an East German couple to stay for several days in the embassy, because he concluded—I think correctly—that these people were genuine defectors. But we had had some very persuasive “fakes” sent to us—to our homes as well as to the chancery. East Germans, by and large, could get into and out [of our embassy]. They certainly did not have to show ID's, as they did going in and out of the embassy in Moscow. They were

usually followed around the corner, if they were on foot, by a member of the East German secret police and then required to show identification, [after they had visited the embassy].

Although East Germans could get into our embassy, God knows what happened to them when they left. As long as they did not say the wrong things within earshot of a microphone, and if they had a car waiting for them at the front gate, they could get in and out [of the Embassy] without being "caught," so to speak. So that is how it happened that we did have both "real" and "phony" defectors on our hands. Sex was used—all of the usual little tricks. The East Germans, as you said before, were very talented in this kind of activity. Again, the East Germans, being Germans, were much more hesitant to pull these games on senior Embassy officers than they were with junior Embassy officers. There was the good old German sense of authority: that you do not mess around with the senior people.

Q: Did you find that the Stasi, or the people who were setting these things up, were running their own game? At the same time [East Germany] was trying to establish better relations with the United States, because we were the "odd man out."

SMITH: Until Afghanistan they were hoping to improve economic relations with the United States. To this day my wife thinks that it is screamingly funny that not only the Western press but the United States and other Western governments assessed the East German economy as the only success story behind the Iron Curtain—the fifth largest industrial nation in the world. Nonsense! The East German economy was going to hell in a hand basket at that time. My wife knew this because, being a smart, instinctively commercial person, she would go out and check factories and markets and travel all around the country—as we could do freely, incidentally. She knew, intuitively, that the East German economy was on its last legs.

Q: It came out, really, how awful things were, at least for the general [East German] public.

SMITH: Only after reunification.

Q: You were "on watch" [in East Germany] for four years. How did we look at the East German economy at that time?

SMITH: We thought that the East Germans—despite the Soviet system—were making their economy work. They were growing and they had considerable research and development capability—first class scientists. The Soviets paid the East Germans real money to do a lot of the experimentation and development for them. So that part is true—they did have a lot of talent. But the notion that, despite having to go through certain motions, because of their Marxist system, they were able to rationalize their economy simply was not true. Frankly, I had virtually no background in economic affairs at that time and I could not judge this. I accepted the conventional wisdom within the U.S. Government that the East Germans were growing and were way ahead of the other East European countries. They just were not. They were just barely keeping it all together. They were Germans. That was why we were all fooled. They were sophisticated. They knew how to falsify their statistics in a way where Western intelligence analysts would miss it, unlike the Czechs and the Poles, who just could not carry this off. They were methodical in their deception with respect to the horrendous condition of their economy, as only the Germans can be. I think that that is part of the reason why we were all fooled.

Q: When you look at it, it really is one of the greatest intelligence failures—and not just an intelligence failure.

SMITH: [It was also] a scholarship failure.

Q: All across the board was the lack of appreciation of how the whole Eastern Bloc was going to hell in a hand basket, economically.

SMITH: I think that we had a better sense, with respect to the other East European countries, than we did in the case of East Germany. East Germany was the most glaring,

single example of this, and I would say that the Soviet Union was the next most glaring example. Our assessment of where things stood economically in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and the Balkans was probably much closer to the mark.

Reagan and Eastern Europe

Q: We didn't expect much of them. Well, it's interesting. One last thing. Was there any change when the Carter administration came into office? The next administration was under Reagan. You were in East Germany during part of that time.

SMITH: Reagan came into office...

Q: In 1981.

SMITH: That is right. Ambassador Ridgway did not come until the beginning of 1983.

Our relations with East Germany, and most countries in Eastern Europe in general, were absolutely frozen, as I said before, from the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan onwards. The U.S.-Soviet relationship became very rocky because of that Soviet action. Then the tensions rising from the Solidarity crisis in Poland made things very difficult and brittle, too.

Your question is a good one, in that President Reagan came into office with antiquated Cold War rhetoric. You would have expected him to dump ice water onto the even token relationships we had with a place like East Germany. But because of Afghanistan and Solidarity, we had already done whatever we could to “ruin” our relations with East Germany before President Reagan came into office.

Q: Today is August 12, 1993. We will continue our interview with Walter B. Smith. The last question which we didn't cover was how did Ambassador Roz Ridgway operate? You mention what a “frozen” period this was in East Germany.

SMITH: I was there with her for less than six months. She had dealt with German affairs at some point, but it was a number of years before, at that juncture. She went from the GDR to EUR [as Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs]. She had not come from EUR, if I remember correctly.

Q: She may have been in Finland.

SMITH: I think so. She was getting into touch with the issues. She took no particular initiatives during the time I was there under her.

Q: Well, in a way, you've said that it was a "frozen" period, and it takes an ambassador a while to get into the swing of things. Obviously, the East Germans weren't jumping all over to get her to do things.

SMITH: There was not much that they could do. They understood our legislative and political system well enough to realize that the "freeze," for example, on any possible increase in U.S. trade with the GDR was really quite serious. I think that one of the reasons why Ambassador Ridgway, during those five months or so, did not start thinking out loud about possible initiatives may have been the fact that her predecessor, Ambassador Herbert Okun, had an enormously sensitive "feel" for the Washington situation, the U.S.-Soviet relationship, and the role of the GDR in our perception of things. He also understood West German relations very well. He was a hard act to follow. There was not anything important left undone when she came on the scene, and she became quickly [aware of this], as I remember it. I was charg# d'affaires a total of nine months during my tour in the GDR, but there was not any real gap between Ambassadors Okun and Ridgway—maybe a few weeks. There was a fairly long gap between Ambassadors Bohlen and Okun—about two and a half months.

Haphazard Use of Senior Officers; A Detail to Defense; Weinberger's Concerns

Q: Then when did you leave East Berlin?

SMITH: I left at the end of June, 1983.

Q: And you returned to Washington.

SMITH: Without a clear assignment, which was perplexing to me, to say the least. I probably was unwise to have stayed four years in East Berlin. Almost a year before my time was up, I began getting in touch with people like Harry Thayer, who was Ambassador to Singapore. There was a political appointee in Copenhagen who was looking around for a DCM, whom I went to see. I stopped in London to see Ed Streator, on my way from East Berlin back to Washington. I do not recall what assignment I was fishing for in London. It is indeed disconcerting—this is still generally relevant because it is probably still true—to a Foreign Service officer whose every single assignment dropped nicely into place all through his junior and mid-career years, to find himself as a senior officer having really to "scrounge" for a new assignment. I had never had this experience before.

Q: I had the same experience. It's horrible.

SMITH: It is horrible. There may be a more competitive situation for junior and mid-career officers now to try to guide and pin down their upcoming assignments, so that it is not a novelty toward the end of their careers. I hope so, because I am not a good bureaucratic fighter at all. In fact, I have quite a bit of dislike for that sort of thing. I suppose that if I had worked at it more methodically, I could have landed something. I do not know.

Q: But actually you got into some rather interesting things.

SMITH: By accident I found myself working for the Pentagon—not physically, but at Ft. McNair, housed in the National War College, with a very bright bunch of people. John Despres was the Director of this "think tank" called the Strategic Concepts Development Center. John Despres is about to become Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Export

Enforcement. When he left the Defense Department, he worked for the Select Intelligence Committee of the Senate and for [Senator] Bill Bradley. He did that for a number of years.

In this little “think tank” there were career Defense types, three from the armed services and some civilian analysts who had been knocking around Defense for a long time, and they could trace for me the history of these initiatives. Apparently, since World War II there have been efforts made in the Defense Department to create, under the Secretary of Defense, a little group of thinkers with no involvement in the bureaucracy. They would be “freewheeling.” It is very disturbing to the traditional military officer to have such people around because, obviously, in the light of their affiliation with the Secretary [of Defense], the career military people, who like to do things in a very organized way, have to pay attention to these people. From a military point of view, such people are “unguided missiles.” However, something very refreshing can, and often does, come of these things. This little group was probably on its last legs. When I got there, it had been in existence for six or seven years. We did, indeed, meet with [Secretary of Defense] Caspar Weinberger once a month and throw “heretical” ideas at him. Weinberger enjoyed it and, I think, may have profited from it.

The one study that I did early on and from which I drew quite a bit of satisfaction concerned the initiatives the United States could take during a period of mounting tension in Europe to try to separate the East Europeans from the Soviets. This involved a number of ideas about “disinformation” and lures to the communist governments of Eastern Europe that we could undertake, without necessarily increasing the danger of war with the Soviet Union. That was the big “if,” of course, because this was potentially a dangerous idea. If the Soviets were having some kind of internal crisis and the Soviet leadership was extremely nervous and was, in fact, creating some kind of East-West crisis because of domestic problems, and we seemed to be making life more difficult for the Soviet Union vis-a-vis their allies in Eastern Europe, this could have tipped the scales in the direction of real war. But I think that the array of ideas that I came up with was within reason. Anyway,

that really excited a lot of imagination in the Defense Department. This is the kind of thing that we were doing.

Q: Speaking of [Secretary of Defense] Casper Weinberger, it was no secret that he and Secretary of State George Shultz didn't get along very well...

SMITH: I think that that is overstated. They inevitably had conflicts of interest.

Q: Apparently, this even went back to earlier times when they both worked together in the Bechtel Corp.

SMITH: Now that you mention it, I do remember those stories.

Q: At least I've seen them. But the main thing was that, to anybody on the outside, it was very apparent that Casper Weinberger was getting enmeshed in foreign policy much more than most secretaries of defense have been. It didn't sit too well, you may say, with the State Department. Did you have this feeling that Weinberger was—because you're really talking about what could be done, which were not military options.

SMITH: Political options.

Q: Political options, and Weinberger was having a lot of fun dabbling in the political environment.

Removing the U.S. Marines from Beirut

SMITH: “Fun” is not the word I would use. Weinberger, in my limited exposure to him, seemed like a conscientious person who worried a great deal. He may, indeed, have worried about the possibility that this or that U.S. foreign policy initiative was going to go awry and he may have fought against the position of the State Department, both overtly and behind the scenes. But it would not have just been for amusement on his part but out of a genuine concern, justified or not. I was involved with the decision that got the Marines

out of Beirut, which is where they should never have been in the first place, because they did not have a defined role. They were there for reasons of “symbolism.”

Q: Why did they [the Marines] stay there? What was your impression of why they were staying there?

SMITH: They were supposed to be implicitly a trip-wire, but we were not about to back up this trip-wire. There were so many combatants floating around Beirut who could easily trip over the “wire” that we were leading with our chin. The problem is that the United States did not take a clear-cut position—this is just me talking—in opposition to the Israeli operation in Lebanon which, at the beginning and with very limited objectives, was at least understandable, if not smart. We could be relatively neutral [about it], with justification. But then the Israelis misread our tea leaves and decided that, as far as we were concerned, they had carte blanche, and they went into Beirut. It was at that point that we should really have come out with strong disapproval and opposition. But we did not. We minced our words. What really shook things up, if you recall, was that horrible massacre at the Shatila...

Q: And Sabra [refugee camps south of Beirut].

SMITH: That happened in September 1982. That [massacre] personally upset President Reagan. Within a week or so, for the first time during the Reagan administration, the U.S. came out with a Middle East peace initiative, an all-encompassing peace initiative, which did not get anywhere. This upset the Israelis and was what we should have been doing all along. Enough said.

So sending the Marines into Beirut was a gesture, as I saw it, to help compensate for the fact that we had gone along with the Israeli invasion of central Lebanon, beyond the initial invasion farther to the south. The [Marine presence in Beirut] was pointless. The issue became how we could withdraw the Marines without loss of face and without demoralizing Lebanese moderates. That is where I came into the picture. I proposed that,

for every Marine taken out, we should explain that we were sending U.S. military “training personnel” into Lebanon to assist the government of Lebanon in developing the military wherewithal to police its own house. I have forgotten what the other gimmickry was, but it was used by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the same day I proposed it, on a Saturday. He went to the White House, and he carried the day. Weinberger was not even present. The chairman obtained White House approval for announcing that the Marines were going to leave.

Q: After that period [assigned to the “think” tank]—you were there how long?

Historical Continuity and the Foreign Service

SMITH: Two years, from 1983 to 1985. It was a two-year assignment. Then—I do not recall how it was that Steve Low [Ambassador Stephen Low, then Director of the Foreign Service Institute] and I got in touch— by accident he and I had been thinking along parallel lines. He was planning an effort to bring about what has finally happened: that is, a proper “campus” for FSI. He felt, as I did, that the Foreign Service did not have a sufficient sense of identity, particularly among incoming new officers. He wanted to have a “museum” in the new FSI building. The military do this [sort of thing] extremely well, as you probably know. [The museum was intended] to reflect Foreign Service traditions and the history of the Foreign Service, particularly for new Foreign Service people to understand that they are part of an organization which has existed practically from the time of the [American] Revolution and that has been very much intertwined with key moments in American history.

So he and I teamed up to get the Association for Diplomatic Studies going, which was going to work on history, including oral history, and on the notion of a “display”—a better way to put it would be a museum of artifacts—to illustrate the evolution of the history of the Foreign Service. I enjoyed that very much.

Q: Of course, for the record here, I am part of this organization [Association for Diplomatic Studies]. Actually, I had been trying to do some oral history also at George Washington University. I joined up with your organization, so this is of great interest to me. What was the reaction [to this idea]? You and Steve Low had a meeting of the minds and you moved over to the Foreign Service Institute. What were some of the attitudes which you encountered?

SMITH: They were largely negative, except in the Office of the Historian [of the Department of State]. I was absolutely amazed that there were such good records gathering dust there covering the early history of our Foreign Service posts. I did something of a survey—and I also published a book. I think you have it.

Q: Yes, I have a copy of your book. It is a very useful book about diplomatic and consular officers up to the Civil War.

SMITH: [The Civil War] was not an inherent cutoff date. I chose just to make the subject matter manageable. I would love to have done another book covering the later periods, but the records covering the beginning period of the diplomatic and consular service were so modest to the end of the Civil War that it was something that I could do.

Q: Anyway, it's a standard resource book which is used all the time. Was the idea of enhancing the morale of the Foreign Service a project that seemed to interest people?

SMITH: I think that people were highly skeptical that a sense of historical perspective was going to make much difference. I hope that they were wrong. I have not followed this [matter more recently] and I do not know what has come of the idea of the historical display. Artifacts have been donated.

Q: A few. It's still in embryonic form, but I think that with the advent of the new campus, which will start operations in September, 1993—I don't know when [my operation] will move.

SMITH: Is there enough space?

Q: There are areas. It's not going to be a space, but there will be areas, where there will be displays, to begin with.

SMITH: It is a pity not to have it all in one place for maximum impact.

Q: This is just a beginning. We're talking about decades. I think it's starting. You look at almost any senior managers in the Foreign Service. They go to a great deal of trouble to employ a highly selected elite. After all, you have a very competitive [Foreign Service] exam. The average Foreign Service officer is six or seven cuts above most other agencies, business firms, or anything else, because of the selection process. Then the senior managers seem to do everything to drag people down, not telling them that they are good but saying that this is what you do—and that you're going to go to dangerous or lousy places. It strikes me as wasting a product.

SMITH: All I can do is say, “Yes.”

Q: Well, what got this Association [for Diplomatic Studies] going?

SMITH: It had to be incorporated. We did not have any money. In any case we did not want to get lawyers into the act. I prepared the incorporation papers myself. It is incorporated in District of Columbia as a non-profit organization. That took a long time—at least for me, because it was all new to me. [Ambassador] Dick Parker entered the scene at that time. By the time I left, which was May 1986, after 11 months, there were roughly 300 members. There were contributions and pledges of more than $250,000 in just 11 months and so it looked as though it was off to a good start.

Tapping Academic and Other Nonconventional Wisdom

Q: Then your last assignment [in the Department of State] was what?

SMITH: Deputy Director of the Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs under a wonderful individual named Hans Binnendijk. He has been in the field of foreign affairs all along, in one way or another, but he is mainly concerned with defense matters and has spent almost his whole career on the Hill [Congress]. A relatively young person. He was the second Director of this center but the first really substantive Director.

Again, this kind of "think tank" in the State Department which would have some freedom from policy concerns to come up with "heretical" ideas was not all that dissimilar from my Defense Department experience. It did have some bureaucratic responsibilities. It was saddled with the supervision, to the extent that they could be supervised, of FSOs serving as "Diplomats in Residence." This was difficult. It was not supposed to be part of my responsibilities but it ended up taking up a good slice of my time. I was engaged in trying to track these people down, trying to keep a record of what they were doing, and trying to integrate their activities into a scheme, wherever possible, particularly with research which we ourselves—only about five or six people—were doing in the Center. We also tried to establish better liaison with the academic world in working on current and very recent foreign affairs problems. It seems to me that there is room for the State Department to learn a good deal from the academic world, but there is not a good "inter-face," if I may use such a wretched term. That was one of the purposes of the Center.

Q: You were there from when to when?

SMITH: I was there from the summer of 1986 until the summer of 1987 when I entered the crash course to find a job, because I was leaving the Foreign Service. So I was there scarcely a year.

Q: How did you find the reception to this idea of having an organization that...

SMITH: Excuse me for anticipating your question, but a very good point comes to mind. I forgot something important that happened at the Center while I was there. In the face of considerable opposition from the geographic bureaus in the State Department we launched the use of simulations for foreign policy problems—something which the military, again, have put to good use. We called on Chester Crocker and made a pitch to him about southern Africa and about the usefulness of having a simulation on it. He overrode everybody in the Bureau of African Affairs, whose opposition was vociferous. We did, indeed, have a simulation of a mounting crisis. It took all of one Saturday.

Q: Chester Crocker was the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs...

SMITH: He was the Assistant Secretary at the time—a bit of a maverick who had a very fine brain.

We had two or three of these [simulations] before I left the State Department. I was thrown into the breach to get this going, although we had a contract for advice with Lincoln Bloomfield from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], a brilliant man. He had been used by the Defense Department in extensio to get various simulations or “games” going for military purposes, with situations which had strong foreign policy overtones. We hired him as a consultant to get this [process] launched at State. Then, eventually, we picked up a very bright young fellow—also from some Congressional staff—who had a background in this area and ran with the ball. But I had to get the thing started. I did not know a thing about it, either, but I was a “convert,” especially after associating with Linc Bloomfield.

As I said, there were two or three of these [simulations] conducted. One of the most interesting ones while I was there dealt with the Korean peninsula. We created a “war is imminent” scenario. The scenarios were very carefully written to be convincing and realistic and to include enough factors of instability to force the participants to get very

excited and busy. The scenarios were written in the Department [of State] by ourselves or by the [geographic] desk but usually by a team of both, with minimal academic or outside guidance, except for “theatrical purposes,” if you will. We would get Bloomfield to give a good “scrub” to these scenarios so that they would work, because he had had the experience of running simulations before.

Q: You were saying that the third [simulation]...

SMITH: There were [simulations] on southern Africa, the Korean peninsula, and one related to India and Pakistan. In each case the [regional] bureau in question resisted the idea, but we were able to persuade the assistant secretary personally to sponsor it, and so people had to fall in line. What I really want to tell you is that every single participant—they were all FSOs—said afterwards that the experience was enormously valuable. I have not followed up on this to see whether this is still happening or not.

Q: So often these promising things fall by the wayside.

SMITH: I know that it continued for at least a half year or a year after I had left the scene but I do not know anything more than that.

The Foreign Service as a Challenge

Q: Well, then, you retired at that point?

SMITH: Yes. I went back to Columbia University and finished the graduate work which I had interrupted when I entered the Foreign Service, which was very satisfying. I really only had to finish writing a major paper.

Q: Looking back on your Foreign Service career, what gives you your greatest [sense of] satisfaction?

SMITH: I think that the sense of adventure and the sense of comradeship with people in [the Service] for the same reasons: namely, serious concern about the importance of defending and advancing the position of the United States in the world. I am hard put to answer [your question]. Whether it was the adventure or the comradeship—I think that it was the two in combination. As I drove here today, I passed the house I first lived in from 1958 to 1960 in Georgetown, when living in Georgetown was inexpensive, because a number of other brand new FSOs were also living there. I thought about my first wife's and my excitement in the summer of 1959 when we had been here only one year, and I was sent on temporary duty to Moscow to work at the American National Exhibition. I had spent years learning the Russian language and then studying Russian history as a graduate student. I had never been there. My wife managed to have herself sent to Moscow by an American company as an exhibitor and learned quite a bit of Russian for the purpose, although that was not a requirement. That was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life, although I knew quite a bit about the country of this temporary assignment. One of my principal, driving interests was Russian history and culture, and that would have made it exciting under any circumstances. So I do not have a good, concise answer to your question.

Q: You've given a concise answer in a way. You're talking about the exhilaration and the comradeship.

SMITH: Yes. “Elitism” is the wrong term. There certainly was a sense that we were all dedicated, that we all had been carefully chosen, and that we were on the move—not individually, but as a group. That is, the young Foreign Service was really going to “make a difference” in the future of the United States.

End of interview